TALES OF BENGAL

By

SANTA CHATTERJEE

AND

SITA CHATTERJEE

R. CHATTERJEE

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DEDICATED

TO

SRIMATI MANORAMA DEVI
OUR MOTHER

IN

HEAVEN

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TALES OF BENGAL

The Ugly Bride

I

THE summer vacation was over and the schools and colleges were reopening one by one. Young boys, who had just passed the Matriculation Examination, were all starting for the city to get themselves admitted to one or other of the many colleges. They tried to look extremely serious with the stamp of newly found wisdom upon their young faces. In this respect, they beat even the more advanced students, so self-important was their bearing and general air. It was their Day; the day when they, after all, did cross the line that had hitherto kept them within the limits of boyhood. But now they looked back upon their previous life, with eyes full, as it were, of contempt, and presented themselves before the world, inwardly towering over the rest like the Colossus of Rhodes.

The third and intermediate class carriages of the railway train were choked with people of diverse characters. Passengers in the women's compartment were also conspicuous by their number and their marvellous capacity to accommodate themselves in a cage, ten foot by five. They were quite happy and at home in the little space, while the Railway Company's notice, "To seat 10," stared down at them aghast and scandalised.

It was mid-night. The train was rumbling along the Loop Line of the E. I. Railway with its load of sleepless passengers, while the silent night trembled at the intrusion. Outside, the faint glimmer of a star or two, the flicker of the vigilant firefly and, close to the line, piles of burning coal, were all the diversion the eye could secure in that flood of inky nothingness. Dense black clouds were covering up the sky very rapidly, and only now and then a shining flash of lightning stabbed deep into their heart to show that they possessed a burning living soul. It was

as if all creation had disappeared in the mysterious darkness, leaving only a handful of fiery dust behind.

Inside the carriage, the Railway Company supplied no more than standing accommodation. So the women tried to find relief in exchange of confidences as if they were intimate friends and not fellow-passengers who might never meet again in this world, or, may be, even in thought. Among the women was one, a native of Bengal but an adopted daughter of the upper provinces, who took the leading part in the conversation. A broad streak of the significant vermilion paint marked the place where she used to divide her hair in her long lost youth, but it looked as if it had suddenly become conscious of its loneliness and blushed at its own prominence. She had a man's shawl to cloak her corpulence, but she took good care to display her profusion of ornaments, which, in the eyes of the envious, were ill suited to her toothless appearance. In spite of the overcrowding of the benches, she lay with the upper part of

her body inclined against a bundle containing a few towels, a gigantic aluminium jug and some vegetables. It was quite evident from her deliberate posture that she intended to stick to her principle of self-help, come what might.

A young school-girl, hailing from some progressive family, sat deformed and huddled up in a space absurdly too small to hold a human being. Her pleasure in the train journey became intensified as the bony knees of the old lady continuously probed and felt for her ribs, keeping time with the motion of the train. The owner of the offensive knees, after a time felt it her duty to utter something by way of apology, and said : " Excuse me, my child. You don't know how impossible it is for an old person to sit up like a pillar. At your age, I could sit up for ten nights and never feel it. I was not like this always." The girl, who found herself a stranger in the company of her fellow-passengers, felt so very shy that a little occasional smile was all the response she made to the familiarities of the old lady.

There were two healthy-looking girls in blue silk jackets, which did not quite match their dark complexion, and they were engaged in an endless discussion of the sorrows of their young lives. They were perhaps finding some solace in thus pouring out their secrets before an assembly of unknown faces. The old lady, who felt much interested in their discussion of how one had lost her mother and another her sister, and how one was not loved by her husband and persecuted by the mother-in-law, suddenly lost all interest in the girl who wore stockings, I mean the school-girl, and asked one of them, "I say, little girl, do you hear? Why haven't you put on your ornaments? You are married and your husband is living; and you are none too old; then why such neglect? What is wrong?"

The elder one of the two answered: "There is no end of troubles, mother, but what is the use of recounting them? I had been to my father's house on the occasion of the marriage of my niece, but, as ill luck would have it, had half

my ornaments stolen. My mother-in-law, when she heard about it, rebuked me so that one would think I myself was the thief. But why should I blame her? Who would not resent the loss of the gold obtained by selling her son? I should not expect a treat of candies from her. That is why I have taken an oath not to put on the remaning ornaments again, as I feel the abuse showered on my father cut into my heart when they rest against my skin."

The old lady dug her knees carefully into the soft flesh of the school-girl who wore her hair in a novel and outlandish style, and replied: "But you could have done one thing. Why did you not replace the stolen pieces with gilt ornaments? You could have escaped the punishment for the moment and might have changed them for gold ones when you had money."

An acquaintance of the old lady thereupon interjected, "You will insist upon giving other people curious advice, sister; can't you do without it even during a journey?" To which the old

lady replied: " Ah! it pains my heart to see others in trouble. She was shedding tears in her trouble and I knew the way out; isn't it my duty to tell her? God has given me experience and age that I might help others. I know the remedy for all evils."

There was a young mother who had remained silent up till now in an obscure corner of a bench. Her sick child was also there upon her lap, lying inert and looking more like a dried fish than a human baby. She had a gold circlet hanging from and encircling her nose like the moat of some ancient city. She was dressed to the extent of a cotton *sari* and a misfitting jacket made of some flimsy stuff. But her poor sick baby was practically smothered in an abundance of flannels and shawls and was on the verge of collapse owing to the excess of wrappings. Every now and then this unfortunate and tortured child opened its eyes and cried as if to protest against the outrage. The fond mother at once took care of her child by putting a few folds more of a dirty shawl over its nose,

which was in her opinion the best method of putting a child to sleep.

The young mother was very much impressed when she heard of this remarkable gift of the old lady, and naturally she came forward a bit. This brought her within the vision of the old lady, who, yawning, and snapping her finger to avert evil, asked: "How old is the child? How thin the poor thing is! How many months old is he?"

"Months indeed, mother! He is just one year and six months, by the grace of the goddess Shashthi.* I never for a single moment take him out of the room, never risk a cold. So I keep all the windows closed even in this awful hot weather. And in spite of all my care, mother, he puts the doctors to shame."

The sibyl answered: "The *Puin*, the evil *Puin*, possesses him. That's what it is. Nothing can cure him except a dip in a pond which is at Chandernagar." Heaven knows what infernal spirit goes under the name of *Puin*, but

* The goddess of children.

the anxious mother was very much impressed when that malignant spirit was mentioned. She eagerly asked: "Tell me exactly where the pond is, mother. We shall pass through Chandernagar and I will bathe him in the pond."

Binu, who was the old lady's friend, was always given to criticising. "Tara-*didi*†," she said, "you should not thus play with the lives of other peoples' children. Who knows what may come out of your quack remedies? Why court the curse of others?"

Tara-*didi* was going to expatiate on the healing powers of the pond, when her attention was diverted by something else.

The train had halted at a small station. But that was not the cause of this sudden diversion of interest. The cause was the precipitate entrance into the carriage of a widow accompanied by a couple of tin trunks, a large bundle containing sundry specimens of wicker

† Didi means elder sister. But it is also used, courteously, to address female friends and acquaintances older than oneself.

baskets, a boy and à girl. As she opened the door of the compartment, a torrent of rain took it into its head to bring up the rear of the procession. This resulted in the expression of some human sentiments on the part of those who were nearest the door, and all eyes were focussed on the poor widow. She looked absolutely harmless. The hair upon her forehead was partly grey but she was still quite straight and strong. The boy was about six or seven years old and the girl was about twelve or thirteen. She was dark, thin and tall, with big round expressionless eyes which seemed for ever at a loss to make anything out of anything, and her broad forehead looked all the larger for her hair having been drawn back as far as it could be and tied into a knot behind her head. It was a huge knot. Not by any profusion of hair but because it was of the shape of a large hollow circle which encircled a stock of hair-pins. Or, shall I say, it was like a wheel in which the rim was of hair and the spokes of iron pins? Her eyes were remarkably pacific but blank,

devoid of any stamp of intelligence; as if waiting for some one to give them meaning. She was not well dressed and the few signs of her or her mother's attempt at fashion added much to her homeliness. The girl entered the carriage, wet through and through, and remained standing in a corner. Her mother made just enough room to seat herself and her son and so the girl stuck to her post with a shapeless but by no means weightless bundle dangling from her arm. "Kalo," said the mother, "why are you standing? Sit down."

But she did not think it necessary to enquire *where* she was to sit down. The obedient girl found a solution of the problem by squatting down plump upon the flooded floor of the compartment. It never entered her head that she had as much right to find a seat for herself on a bench as other people, and her plain appearance, made more unattractive through careless dressing, stimulated nobody's sympathy enough to invite her to any seat that remained undiscovered.

The inquisitive soul which lurked

behind the corpulence of Tara-*didi*, had become very restive at the possibility of gaining some new knowledge from this last addition to the number of passengers, and was dying to feed upon the widow's autobiography and her family history. So, before the girl could properly squat on the wet floor, she found the mouth of Tara-*didi*, which was, by the way, almost full of a semi-liquid mixture of saliva and juice of betel leaves, in front of her nose making a gurgling noise, which conveyed to her dull sense the information that the owner of the mouth was very much interested in their affairs and wanted to know who they were. The half-mute girl fixed her big eyes upon her mother as if to ask whether it would be right for her to answer. She feared lest she should disobey the command of one or other of the numerous Sastras, by answering a straight question. Kalo's mother answered for her daughter and said: "We are Brahmins; she is my daughter."

"Your daughter! I thought she

was your granddaughter! She is probably a daughter of your old age! This is your son, eh ? ”

Kalo's mother said, “ Yes. He is the only one I have got. After giving birth to five daughters, I prayed and prayed and the gods favoured me. But wretch that I am, I could not enjoy such happiness for long. Before he was one, his father went away to answer the call of his gods.”

The sympathetic Tara-*didi* struck her own forehead with her open palm. “ You must have been,” she said, “ born under an evil star, or why should you meet with so much misfortune and bring forth daughters by the dozen? But why have you not married this daughter as yet? ”

Binu was feeling very uneasy at this fresh outburst of her friend's inquisitiveness, and, to put a stop to the flow of her none too sweet words, she said, “ Why take so much interest in what does not concern you? ”

This rebuff had absolutely no effect, and the undaunted old lady replied:

"Why! is it a sin to sympathise with others and to give them a chance to unburden their sorrowful hearts?"

An expression of sublime sentiments which at once melted the heart of Kalo's mother, who said: "I am going to Calcutta to settle about her marriage, or why else should I, a country-woman, take the risks of a railway journey? The unfortunate girl has lost her father, and so her mother must go about entreating others. I have come to know of a probable bridegroom, but his people would not see the bride unless in Calcutta. Indeed it is only to the greatest of sinners that daughters are born!"

At this Kalo lifted her soft eyes and fixed them upon the old lady and her mother. Then once more she shrank within herself, and went on listening to the conversation. There was no pained look in her eyes, nor tears, nor did her heart respond to the cruel words of her mother in painful throbs, for such heartlessness was her daily food and her mind had long become dead to such insults.

So nobody could have judged from her appearance that she herself was the object of these heartless words.

Tara-sundari turned towards her and asked, " What is your name, my child? "

The girl looked at her mother as if for instruction, and her mother said, " Tell her your name. What is the harm? "

The girl's face pleaded her own guilt in being born a daughter as she answered, " Kalidasi."

" Then, God help you! " said Tara-*didi.* " You are not likely to be married."

Binu made a dry face at this. " Ah, stop your nonsense, *didi*," she put in.

Tara-sundari resented such interference with her philanthropy and replied, " Why? Have I said anything wrong? Now look here (this to the widow), as soon as you reach Calcutta, find a suitable name for your daughter; for, be sure, the modern young man will never marry a Kalidasi or a Jagadamba, or a Katyayani, or any one with a name

smelling of the days of your great-grandma."

To change the topic, Binu asked the young girl who wore leather shoes like men, the school-girl to wit, "What is your name, please; it must be something very charming and sweet?"

The girl smiled faintly as she answered, "Sobha."

But man is a creature of his tendencies, and so Tara-*didi* at once used this new piece of information in aid of her own philanthropic endeavours. "Did you hear that?" she said to the widow. "Give her some such name. Either Sobha, Bibha, or Abha. I have borne no less than eight daughters. They were my own, but for the sake of truth, I must admit that not all of them were like so many golden statues. Still, that did not prevent my naming them, Swarnalata,* Kanaklata, etc."

Kalo was hitherto ignorant of the wonderful virtues of a name. So she took this opportunity to turn her head

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* Golden Creeper.

towards Sobha to have a look at one who had so much of that wealth. Her eyes were overflowing with admiration, which was but ill-expressed; for from her childhood she had been drilled into the habit of gazing vacantly without any definite meaning. Her soul felt shy and afraid to look out of the windows of its cage.

This movement on the part of Kalo, at once brought into prominence her wide forehead, from whose surface every single hair had been carefully drawn away upwards, and Tara-sundari lost no time to notice this particular point and to express her opinion on it. "My goodness, what a shameful way to treat one's hair! As she is, she is none too charming, and if you do her hair like that and display that race-course of a forehead, I should not be astonished if nobody even looked at her."

The owner of the race-course did not lower her head but kept her vacant eyes fixed upon the critic. Tara-sundari suddenly caught hold of Sobha's chin in order to bring her hair within the

view of everyone. " See how she has done it," she exclaimed. " Do her hair loosely like this, and cover up a bit of that broad forehead. Holy Durga! Is this the way to treat human hair?"

Kalo's mother was looking hard at Sobha, as if to find out the secret of the fashion, and the girl feeling very shy at this inspection turned away her head.

Tara-sundari waited a moment as if to recover her lost breath, and then suddenly said with the tone of one inspired: " Look here, present your daughter to the bridegroom's people with her hair done loose. And do you know what a *jhapta* is? The ornament some use on the forehead. Get one, and there you are! No one need know whether she has a forehead at all. Moreover, she will look beautiful, too."

Kalo's mother made a sorry face: " But that is not her only defect, she is too dark."

Tara-sundari was a picture of pride as she said, " Do you know, I have married eight daughters, eight! What if she is dark? Give me the darkest

girl with any sort of a nose to show, if I don't marry her, I will rub my nose on the pavement by way of penance."

"If she is a girl," she continued, "that's enough. Hear what I say. Have you seen powder? Get four pice worth of pink powder from the market and apply it to her face. She will soon look fairer. If you can't get powder, pass some meal through a piece of muslin and keep it handy. Then pass your hands very lightly over a white-washed wall—not a mud wall—mind you, very lightly, and apply them to the girl's face. Then get some of the meal and with the corner of your sari, apply it gently to her face! And one thing more; present the girl to them just after sunset and in candle light. Tell her not to lower her face, for that makes a person look dark—understand? And if they ask to see her hand, show them the palm."

"But if they want to see the bride in daylight, what then?" asked the mother.

Tara-sundari laughed contemptuously at this fresh sign of stupidity in

the woman, and said: "Of course! Mere asking will not procure a thing. Haven't you got an ounce of common sense in your head? Tell them that in your family you don't show brides in the day time. You don't, for it is forbidden. *Bus!* What more, who can do that which is forbidden?"

The tremendous logic and force of this argument were not lost upon the widow, who swayed her head up and down as if intoxicated with the wine of the old lady's wisdom. Binu laughed derisively and said, "*Didi,* you have gone clean off your head."

But *Didi* could not stand this new affront and burst out, "Why, what have I said wrong? It seems that one will soon be prosecuted for doing good to others!" She was apparently very pleased with herself and looked at Sobha for a supporting glance as she said: "What do you say, my dear?"

A faint smile was the only encouragement Sobha could spare; but that was enough. The woman with a sick child, who a little while ago was

receiving the full benefit of Tarasundari's "Be-helpful" nature, now embraced the opportunity to attract attention. She left the seat, which she had in an obscure corner, and ploughed her way to the front by the slow but sure process of treading upon other people's toes, and asked, "Do you know whether those who will come to see the bride, belong to the bridegroom's family or not?"

Kalo's mother said, "Oh, not of the family, but only relations."

"Then do one thing. Dress your daughter in up-to-date fashion and take her to a photographer's. They will make her all right in appearance. My younger sister, she had nearly no nose and only dots for eyes, but thanks to Boron Shepad Saheb, she looked in the picture like a fairy with her wings off. He will make your daughter's high forehead and sunken cheeks absolutely charming."

On hearing this latest, Kalo turned round and greeted this novel and wonderful suggestion with one of her

quiet and expressionless glances. Her mother said, " Ah Kalo, at your age too, why are you turning and twisting like a tomboy? "

Her 'aged' daughter at once assumed her former position and remained still like a stranded boat.

Tara-sundari pointed to Sobha and observed, " But, sister, do not forget to do her hair into a loose knot. If the hair refuses to stay upon the forehead, put a wet towel upon it and press it hard. Then, you are sure to have it done nicely."

Binu now took a part in the conversation and said, " *Didi*, when you have told her all you know, why not tell her about Panchi *Ghatki** as well? "

Tara-sundari, who was the very picture of unflinching courage, seemed to lose a bit of her radiance at this. Still she said, " No harm in telling her. Yes, that time even I was taken in. Kanak, my youngest daughter, was too dark in complexion and so Panchi *Ghatki* undertook to paint her up. She said

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* A female match-maker.

that the paint would stick till all the ceremonies were over. I, like a fool, believed her, but within three days the trick was found out. And didn't they make life miserable for my poor girl! I had to sell my own ornaments and give them two thousand rupees in cash before the uproar could be stopped."

"What if the girl is made to suffer?" observed Kalo's mother in a very normal tone. "Aren't women born to suffer? And you know, time heals all wounds. If I only can shake her off my shoulders, for the present, I shall be quite content."

The fear of some unknown danger roused the instincts of Kalo, who closed up to her mother and clutched her sari with her thin and long hands. The mother took her son upon her lap and pushed Kalo off, saying, "Ah, you hurt me! Get up and bring the sweets for Nitu. How long can he, poor child, remain without eating? You may take one or two, if you like, too."

Kalo shuffled away in quest of the sweets, but she had to stand up to do

this, and Tara-sundari made a face as if she was in front of some prehistoric saurian monster as she gasped forth, "Holy gods! Is she a girl or a moving palm tree! These village people are absolutely devoid of sense. Can't they starve their daughters a bit? They *will* treat the unmarried daughters to cream and sugar to show their maternal affection. Why do you walk so erect like a sepoy, my girl? Just stoop a little in future."

Kalo knew full well that she committed new crimes at every step, but she was not aware that she had sinned against the commandment which forbade girls to grow up. The poor girl was up till now engrossed in listening to the analysis of her personal charms and schemes for their improvement and she was hoping to eat some sweets which she had in her hand. But hearing this new revelation from Tara-sundari, she felt very much afraid lest she should suddenly grow even taller before those critical eyes by eating the sweets, and the poor girl only closed her fingers over

the longed-for delicacies and sat down with her body bent and head lowered, as became an unmarried girl. She perhaps thought that if she ate unseen by others, God would not add to her already long list of sins.

The train stopped at Burdwan. Tara-sundari got down with Binu, and her parting words were, "Remember that if you only follow my advice, you will safely get her off your hands. But don't forget to bless me with uplifted arms."

To which Kalo's mother replied, "*Didi,* if my daughter finds her luck through you, I shall remain your bond-slave for life."

II

A cousin of Kalo's father was a clerk in a business office in Calcutta. After much deliberation he had settled her marriage with the son of a Munsif.

The maternal uncle of the bride-groom was by profession a negotiator of marriages or, in brief, a match-maker. He made his fortune in this business.

He got his fees as negotiator before the actual ceremony took place, and when the parents began their fight during the ceremony over the so-called dowry, he played the peace-maker and got something out of the bride's father (who is the defeated one by right). This able man had kindly consented to pilot Kalo across the waters of matrimony, for a sum of two thousand rupees, Kalo's patrimony, and the few ornaments Kalo's mother had left, for she had been gradually dispossessed of all ornaments in the process of marrying her four elder daughters. Her father, in his old age, again gave her mother these ornaments as a means whereby to buy Kalo a husband. What proportion of these ornaments was to adorn the inside of the able negotiator's safe and how many were actually to be used in settling the bargain, was a problem which baffled speculation.

They were able to secure the services of Panchi *Ghatki.* Kalidasi presented herself before her inspectors, with her manufactured complexion, her borrowed

and made-up charms (thanks to Tarasundari) and her load of ornaments. She stood facing the setting sun that she might have a touch of his departing glory. The mellow light diffused by a candle was all that could expose the deceit. She was no longer Kalidasi but was called Subarnalata (the Golden Creeper), and when she stepped into the room as one moved by machinery, she stood stooping shamefacedly to disguise her stature. The deputation which came to examine the bride was much impressed by her splendour and said: "The bride is not bad-looking, but the powdering and dressing-up is excessive."

"But what is to be done?" the ready witted negotiator replied. "That is the fashion of the day. You can but subtract somewhat from her charms to know her true value."

They were at a loss to decide how much to subtract, and to evade the problem for the moment they changed the subject and asked the girl, "What is it you read?"

Though she never went further than

the second primer, Kalo readily gave them a catalogue of the books she read, which included everything from the classics downwards.

After that, when they had finished examining her in walking, talking and other essential bridely accomplishments, she was declared to have passed, if not with honours, at least tolerably well. Kalidasi was so effectively concealed in Subarnalata that even the trained eyes of the examiners failed to detect the presence of the former. The bridegroom was away, out of Calcutta, with his parents. The photograph, taken by " Boron Shepad Saheb," which was sent to him for approval, was even better than the painted and dressed-up Kalidasi.

Finally, by the favourable influence of the stars, Subarnalata was married in her paternal home without any hitch whatever.

When some days after her marriage she arrived with her husband at his house, the place was crowded with relatives and guests. The burning mid-day

sun, combined with frequent weeping, made her veiled and lightly ornamented figure appear not as graceful as was expected. The bridegroom alighted from the carriage with a gloomy countenance. But when the mother-in-law went to bring in the new bride, she at once marked the dark colour of the arm she held. "*Dada*,* " she cried out, "she looks terribly dark skinned! Didn't you say, she was beautiful and all that?"

The experienced Dada made a face like one dropped from the moon, and exclaimed, "Is that so! Then, no doubt we are cheated! At the time, she looked almost pink. If you do not believe me, ask Dhiresh; he was with us."

But the mother-in-law did not refer to Dhiresh. She lifted the bride's veil instead. This brought the emaciated face of Kalidasi to view.

"Holy mother!" she cried out. "It is that broom-stick of a girl, that black owl, we met in the train! Ah, my fate! I try to do other people good and see the result! It is like being stabbed with

* Elder brother or cousin.

one's own knife! What a shame, what a shame! In this age there is nothing called *dharma*† ! Oh what a fraud, what a shame !"

The mock Subarnalata fixed the dull eyes of Kalo upon her mother-in-law. The able negotiator, Kalo's husband's uncle, cursed her people to the best of his ability and said, " By my good name, if I don't avenge this trifling with me, I am a dog."

And Tara-sundari addressing her daughter-in-law, cried: " Do you hear, O daughter of a saint! Tell your sweet mamma when you go back home, that a black skin does not sell so easily. When she can send with you gold enough to balance your glory, she can send you back to this house again, but not before. I can get a better bride for my son."

Kalo heard all this abuse with her head bowed at an obedient angle.

That a woman is born to suffer was taught her from her birth. So she did not find anything strange in this new misfortune. She heard the match-

† Religion, or righteousness.

making uncle say, " Tara, what are you waiting for? Stop chattering and take in your son and daughter. This has happened for your benefit. You have only to turn the tap to get supply of ready cash whenever you want."

Thus began Kalo's new life of happiness. Who knows whether Tarasundari ever boasted her part in this new drama of blissful existence, but of this we are quite sure that Kalo's mother blessed her with uplifted arms.

Loyalty

I

At the extreme end of the village of Madhabpur, there stands a red building, rearing its stately head in the midst of a garden. A girl could be frequently seen on its balconies, which boasted of beautiful stone balustrades. In the early morning she would stand on the eastern balcony looking towards the river with her face resting on her two slender and white hands. The pure fair complexion used to take on a rosy tinge from the red blush of dawn. If I call her simply a girl, she is not fully described. It was hard to tell her age. Her large grey eyes carried in their depths the sorrow of centuries. Her carriage was slow like one of advanced years, but her slight willowy figure was that of a young girl.

Before the break of day, at the first note of birds, the slender figure of Sunanda was to be seen advancing towards the bathing place of the river,

which flowed by the red house. As she returned after her bath, her wet dress clinging to her young body and leaving the impress of her wet feet on every step of the Ghat, she might easily have been mistaken for a Naiad. Water-drops fell from her body like a shower of pearls and her wet hair clung to her marble white arms as the fibres of the water-moss cling to the stalks of lotuses. Her lips were not bright red, but soft pink like the heart of the mother of pearl. Yet what it was that caused this water-goddess to leave her mysterious watery kingdom and sigh out her grief in a secluded corner of this hard earth, remained hidden from the world.

The laughter and song of Sunanda filled the old palace the whole day. Her face did not lack the light of merriment, though it reminded everyone of a lily drenched with tears. Her friends not unfrequently asked her, "Can you tell us, dear, where you find such a store of laughter?" As the sunshine breaks through the dark clouds of July, so Sunanda used to smile and answer,

"What have I to grieve over? I have no home, no family, there is none to cause me sorrow with death or to make me weep with the pangs of love unrequited. To me, the world is full of strangers. Tears are never wasted over strangers. So why should I not laugh?"

What to another would have been the greatest of sorrows, was to this girl a never-ending source of laughter, or at least so she said. "Are you made of stone?" asked a friend once. "No, my dear, I am flesh and blood, like the rest of you," answered this strange girl.

But the smile vanished as soon as she was alone. It was like a costly ornament, put on in public for the sake of appearance. And one does not need adornment when there is none to see.

The temple of the god Shiva stood by the side of the river. As regularly as the sun rose every morning gilding the spire of the temple with its golden light, and as often as it went down setting the western sky on fire with its dying breath, even so could Sunanda be seen every evening standing before the image of the

god in a dress all white and gold, with her palms joined in the attitude of prayer. In the soft light of the temple lamp her white face looked still more colourless. She seemed like a statue of veneration, modelled in wax, so still and white.

But after the evening worship as she used to prostrate herself in obeisance before the god, she resembled a flower-laden jasmine plant in the moonlight. It seemed impossible then that so fair a thing could have taken its birth on this earth; she called to mind a garland of celestial flowers blown off from its heavenly home by a mad stormy wind.

In fair weather or foul, in rain, storm and darkness, she never failed in her attendance. In the same place she ever stood and in the same dress. Joy and sorrow struggled to gain ascendancy in the expression of her face. But so long as the eyes of others rested on her face, it never lost its smile.

II

In the bedroom of Sunanda, at the head of her bed, stood a small box of

marble. It contained a few trifles, the largest in size being a letter. It was written by herself, but for all that she cherished it. There were no means of knowing beforehand to whom it was written, as it was not addressed. But the contents revealed his name. They also revealed many things about the person who wrote it, which otherwise would have remained unknown for ever. The letter ran thus:

"Every human being possesses something which to the possessor is priceless. And this thing, he or she is unwilling to share with anyone, lest it loses its value. I have such a thing; it is my sorrow. I do not want to share it with anybody. There is nothing else of my very own, to which I can cling, which I can cherish in the inmost recess of my heart. So I keep it jealously hidden. But a time will come when I shall cease to be, and then I wish you to take charge of it. It is my very own and to none else can I entrust it. It came to my heart from the hands of God and none knew. I have kept his trust. I hid this

priceless sorrow beneath my mantle of laughter, as the green turf hides the treasure lying in the dark womb of the earth. You too have always looked upon my face masked with laughter; so I do not know whether you will believe this tale of tears.

A human child takes its birth in a world full of light and joy. But I came into a world which had no welcome for me. The only person who then took me in her arms, did so with eyes full of tears. To me, the world meant nothing but my mother's arms; the single tie which bound me to this earth was her love. To a child the world is full of friends and playmates. The ties of blood bring some to it and others come drawn by the bond of joy and love. The world is a willing slave to the child-emperor. Miserable indeed is he, whom no child rules with its soft little fingers. But from the moment of my birth the world frowned upon me. I did not know with whom ties of blood connected me and no person ever approached me through love. Dumb, inanimate nature was my sole

friend. I was a stranger to the play of human emotions.

The memories of my childhood are all vague and shadowy. There is no event, no loving playmate, to which these shadows could cling and take distinct shape. There is only one face which comes to my mind when I think of that period. It is the face of my mother.

The first distinct impression of my life, the first that I remember with any degree of clearness, is one of weeping and tears. I was clasping my mother round her neck and sobbing upon her shoulders. Tears ran down her face, too. The memory of her tear-stained face still remains with me; it was like a white lotus drenched with dew. An old man was standing by my mother. Clusters of hair, white as the sea-foam, framed his gentle and benign face. " I have come to entrust this poor thing to you," my mother was saying. " Miserable mother that I am, I cannot by any means keep my child with me." The old man stretched out his arms to take me. I

clung to my mother more firmly, while her tears fell fast on my hair. I have told you already that the world then meant nothing to me but my mother. It seemed that the world was taking farewell of me in tears. The arms of the old man did not tempt me. I viewed him with suspicion. I was too young to understand fully what was happening, but the sight of my mother's tears filled my heart with terrible forebodings. I have no distinct recollection now, how long that drama of tears and sorrow lasted, but I vaguely remember that when the cruel hands of the old man finally tore me from my mother's arms, it was already dark, and the roads had become deserted. My mother ran back to the door immediately. She wanted to be away before she lost her resolution. She looked back at me from the door and with an inarticulate word of blessing, vanished for ever. It was the last sight I ever had of my mother. I do not know who she was. I have forgotten her parting words. I only remember the tears which fell upon my

hair as she kissed me farewell. My mother was the only person on whom I had any claim, and the only gift I had of her was her tears. With this treasure alone I began my life. Time has continually added to it, but the capital was my mother's gift.

I fiercely resented this, I rebelled against my creator, I was determined to oppose his decree. From the day when my cruel benefactor tore me away from my mother's embrace and took me to his house, I banished tears from my eyes.

In that strange abode I passed the first few days in total silence. I refused to get up from the bed on which I had taken refuge when my mother made me over to the old man. I would not eat or drink. The old man tried patiently

to bear with me. He used to come to feed me with his own hands, but I pushed aside his hand in anger and would not open my lips. I used to hold my lips fiercely with my teeth, lest they should open without my consent. The old man waited and waited with my food, sometimes till evening. He himself went without food the whole day, because he would not eat while the child entrusted to him remained unfed.

To propitiate the little stranger every means was taken. My room gradually began to take on the appearance of a toyshop. The garden was stripped of its wealth for me. And there also appeared a crowd of little boys and girls. They had been bribed by the good old man to come and make friends with me. I never had any friend, so my whole heart was greedy for them. My benefactor now watched me with a sigh of content. The smile returned to my face.

Gradually the silent old house became home to me. I began to call the old man grandfather. I was called

Sunanda by him. I do not know if ever I had any other name.

When I had become a little older he taught me how to worship the god Shiva. I found my greatest joy in that. Grandfather had told me that to the god all can be told, all can be asked of him. Even the greatest of sorrows can be turned into bliss by him. I eagerly believed him. Every evening, as I prostrated myself before the god, I told him all that filled my heart. To men I had nothing to confide. They were nothing to me. I gave them only smiles. My god alone knew of that well of tears which I called my heart.

I lacked neither love nor care in my grandfather's house. But for all that, I never could forget that there was a great difference between myself and other children. He used to feed and bathe me himself, when I was too young to do things for myself, but even in the coldest winter, if he happened to touch me before his prayers, he would go and bathe again to purify himself. To save me pain and mortification he took every

care to hide these things from me, but it is hard to deceive one whose eyes have lost the illusions which love gives to every child. Whenever he was detected by me, he shrank away from me, lest I should ask for explanations. But what right had I to complain of anything to man? To my god alone I complained. With smiles and prattlings I tried to put the old man at his ease, as if I had seen or understood nothing. Many a time have I seen him questioned by his neighbours as to who I was. It was difficult for him to answer the question before me, but I used to break in with, "I am his adopted grandchild," and so relieve him.

The attenuated figure of the old man became more so, as the years advanced. One day I heard that we were going away to his country-house. It was in Madhabpur. He wanted to close his eyes in the place where he first opened them.

We arrived in that red brick house, together with the mango-blossoms which heralded the approach of spring in the

huge garden which surrounded the house. The house stood silent and deserted. I have heard that once it held many persons, and festivities were of daily occurrence. But the huge reception rooms were empty now. Only the daily worship at the temple of Shiva still went on.

My grandfather had wealth once and he also possessed numerous children and grandchildren. But all had followed the departing footsteps of the goddess of plenty. At last he had only one grandson left. But in his terrible bereavement he turned away from this boy and left his native home. He did not want any more ties, which are formed only to be broken.

And as death approached him, he returned again to his deserted home. "Here," he said, "have I given up all whom I had cherished in life, in death I will not be parted from them. Let my ashes, too, mingle with theirs."

Here it was that I first met you. You seemed to me as beautiful as a single streak of light in this kingdom of

dark desolation. Many years have passed since. I wonder if you still remember that day.

I think that the river must have flowed close to your house at that time when these stairs were made leading down to the depths of the clear current. Since then it has changed its course a little and the water has receded more and more, leaving the stairs bare and dry. After stepping down people now have to walk a short distance over the dry mud in order to reach the water. A big banyan tree stands close by; it has stood so from time immemorial, looking down at its own image reflected in the dark blue surface below. The current of the river has gradually washed away the earth from around its numerous roots, leaving them exposed. Underneath this tree two large stones have been laid down and these now form the bathing-place of the village people.

On that day, I had come out of my room and was sitting on one of these stones. The water had not yet turned rosy with the first kiss of the god of day;

it was lying still and grey before me. The birds had just begun to send out welcoming trills to the fast advancing sun-god. I was thinking of my own fate. I did not know whether I had any relations of my own living, and the person with whom destiny had made me take shelter was fast approaching the end of his days. Suddenly I looked up at the sound of footsteps. You were advancing towards the river and to my eyes you looked as resplendent as the god of light himself. In the half light of the early dawn we first exchanged glances. It was the most inauspicious yet the most auspicious moment of my life.

A young heart craves for human company and, as there were only the old man and myself to chose between, it was no wonder that you chose the younger one as your companion, and so did I choose you. The smile that I had worn as a mask became real through your friendship. So long as this lasted I banished all sorrow and sadness from my heart; all was full of light within and

without. How the days passed! They now seem like dreams to me, dreams that have vanished in the fierce light of day. But memory still lingers on like some golden feather dropped from the flitting wings of the fairy of dreams.

Within those few days I tried to gather ample compensation for all the dark days of my life. The harp of my life resounded with joyous strains full and loud. But in my eagerness, perhaps I had struck too hard; for one day the string broke. From that day the harp has been mute.

But at the same time when we were filling the hours with joy and laughter, the messenger of death had already entered the house. My grandfather took to his bed; it was his last illness. The day was given over to joy, but morning and evening I went twice to his room and sat by him. He used to look up at me, his gentle eyes full of pity, and he stroked my hair with his trembling hand. I knew that his heart was more full of the thoughts of the girl whom he was leaving behind than of the

blessed land towards which every day carried him nearer. The waif whom he had long sheltered would now be left alone and shelterless. This gnawing anxiety seemed to hasten his end. He was one of the noblest of human beings, yet he used to bathe after touching me, to purify himself. My touch was pollution even to him! So what could I hope for at the hands of any other?

But these thoughts came afterwards. At that time I had no time to spare for gloomy thoughts. Grandfather sometimes used to draw me down to his bedside; he struggled to say something; but he could not utter it. His eyes expressed what his tongue failed to do; he seemed to ask a favour of me,—of me to whom he had given everything. But what that favour was, I never tried to know. I had then no time for reading the language of an old man's dim tear-filled eyes. Your bright dark eyes told me a new tale every morning, and my eyes wanted nothing else. So after a few hurriedly spoken words, accompanied with bright smiles, and after a few pats

on his pillows, I used to leave his room and go off. Countless sighs from a broken heart pursued me, but I paid no heed. Indeed I was not even conscious of them. It is only now that I find time to think of them.

Do you remember that day, when you and I together made a garland of white lotuses, sitting on the grass by the side of the river? You took one end of the string and I the other, and we both worked at the same time. The chain was very long before we finished. In the middle was a large full-blown lotus. Grandfather was very fond of lotuses, so I took the garland to his room. "Look here, grandfather," I called out, "what a beautiful garland! See, if I wear it, it reaches down to my feet."

He turned round and said, "Indeed child, you are nearly covered with flowers! You look like the goddess Saraswati! Who gave you so many flowers?"

"Your grandson Shankar," I answered.

His pale face seemed to turn paler

still. Yet he laughed and said, "My dear, you spend your days in laughter alone. But life is not all laughter; there are tears enough in it. It is well to be prepared for both, otherwise sorrow gives too severe a shock. May it never enter your life. Still you never know."

I hung the garland on the wall, and left the room. Our joyous laughter had penetrated even into the sick room and told its own tale. But it found no answering joy there; only sadness. And why?

I passed that day alone and speechless. The shadow of some impending calamity darkened everything for me. In what shape was it coming? The old man had told me to be ready; but for what was I to be ready? At one time I thought you must have told him something against me. But I dismissed that thought, because why should you? I had never harmed you. Then,—was my mother dead? Was my grandfather trying to prepare me for that? I was a mere child when I had last seen her: I called to mind her tear-stained face, but

my own eyes remained dry. Why should I weep for a mother who had given me away. Even the street beggars share their poverty with their children, but my mother had not done even that. I hardened my heart. Why should I weep and tremble for anything or anybody? I chased away all the dark shadows from my heart.

But from that day the light of joy which had filled my universe began to fade fast. I began to get dispirited and dull. I refused to go out of the house, and frittered away the time in useless and trivial tasks. You seemed surprised at my behaviour; sometimes you even asked the reason. I laughed in answer, but the laughter was becoming hollow and insincere.

A few days passed in this way. Then one day in the morning you entered grandfather's room and spent two or three hours there. I do not know what you told each other, but as soon as you left the room I was sent for. As I entered he turned slowly round and said, "My child, my days are numbered.

Before passing away I have something to say to you and Shankar. To him I have told all I had to say. Besides, he is a man, he can very well look after himself. But I am anxious for you, my darling."

He ceased to speak and gazed intently at me. I sat still with beating heart and averted face.

After a time he began again: "My darling child, perhaps you do not know how much I love you. My love for you is no whit less than the love I feel for Shankar. The day when I deserted this house and left it ruined and desolate, I did so, swearing not to love anybody again in this world. Love is a never-ending source of suffering and agony. But your face made me break my promise. The heart never remains empty for long; some one or other creeps into it and establishes a new sway. Such is the law of the Creator. So you came in, the child-queen of my heart. Shankar was then with his mother's relations. I left him there willingly. I did not want any more

ties of affection, but the world is full of them, so I could not escape. How I brought you up, with what care and love, you know well. I sheltered you from sorrow and sin to the best of my power. But who can go against destiny? It is I who must deal you the first great blow of your life. I tried hard to shirk this terrible duty. But I could not find any other way."

I sat there silent, my heart turning cold within my breast.

What I heard was terrible for me. I did not know what sin was, but I understood I owed my being to sin. Then it was I knew what had caused my mother to desert her baby. It was not property; she was afraid of herself, she feared to contaminate me. She gave me up to this saintly man in the hope that his merit might wash away my sin. But can any one wash a piece of charcoal white? The sin of my birth clung to me.

The old man went on, "My child, I have loved you above everything. But man is weak, he is stained easily. I

know that I have caused you pain sometimes by my treatment of you, as one whose touch makes me unclean, yet I could not help it. I have ever loved and cared for you as my own child, and now that I am dying, I have only one favour to ask of you. I found out long ago, what perhaps you do not know yet. To Shankar you have become as the apple of his eye. He confessed it to me to-day, my darling. I know that you are pure as the water of the sacred Ganga. But society will not recognise it. You are an outcast by its laws. Swear to me, my child, touching my white hair, that you will do nothing to make Shankar ashamed before his fellow-men; that you will leave him, the last of my race, free to live a life worthy of his birth. If you become hard, he will easily forget you sooner or later. Such is man's nature. I will leave you everything that I die possessed of. You will be able to maintain yourself in decency and comfort."

At this mention of his property, I felt as if someone had struck me with stinging nettles. But without a murmur

I swore the oath which he desired me to take. Then I understood how much I had taken upon myself.

The old man blessed me, " May you be born as Savitri in your next birth. The penance you will undergo in this life will wash away all your sins. Give up everything to the god; he alone can be the husband of such as you."

After that I came out of the room. I had gone in a girl, I came out a woman. I knew then that I had given you everything unknowingly. I loved you above all earthly things, so I must forget you. But the human heart knows no master. You were my friend in times of joy, but in this day of sorrow you became all the world to me. I could not forget, but I could make you forget.

I began to move away from you by imperceptible degrees. I did not want any questions and explanations. So I behaved as if my household tasks engrossed all my attention and I had no time for child's play. Even to myself I pretended that you were nothing to me but a chance playmate.

Before this I never mentioned the word marriage to you. But now I always jested about your coming marriage and your future wife. This made you angry, which made me go on the more. That day, the last day of the month of *Paush* it was, you came to me with a garland of flowers. As you gave it to me, you were about to say something when I interrupted you: "What a fool you are," I cried, "to be always running after thankless tasks. What's the use of presenting flowers to me? It is nothing but casting pearls before swine. Keep your presents for one who will want them."

You looked at me with eyes full of pain. You never expected such words from me. I began to talk at random, as if I had not understood anything. But you did not know what it cost me to hurt you. Perhaps you thought that my heart was made of stone. It is out of such beds of stone the mighty rivers take their birth.

You had come to say something, but it remained unspoken. You went out

with a sad and disappointed look. I called in our neighbour Manda and began to talk and laugh with her aloud. I am quite sure that you heard me; I meant you to do so.

It was my love for you which made me as hard as flint. I went on striking at your heart mercilessly. I must make you think me cruel and worthless. I must make you forget; I had promised to the old man.

I was born to a heritage of shame and ignominy. I was determined to keep it to myself. I would not allow any one to share it, least of all you. I would not let a particle of my shame rest upon you, and form a stain upon your fair name. So I tried to keep you at a distance from this child of sin. I was afraid that, if once I let you guess the secret of my heart, nothing would keep you from me. You would gladly share my burden of shame. But I must not let you. You were the last of a noble family and I an outcast, whom God and man have forsaken. How could two such persons come together?

Once I thought of confessing everything to you. I wanted to hear all you had to say and to tell all that filled my heart. I wanted to tell you what had caused me to behave like a heartless thing and what it had cost me. But I soon gave up the idea. Why make your sorrow greater? You must forget me; then what was the use of such understanding? Yet now I think I should have told you all.

Once again we met by the side of the lotuses. Our eyes were full of the memory of the first meeting. I turned away my eyes lest they should reveal my secret, and said lightly: "What a wealth of flowers we have this year!"

"Why, don't you remember," you said, "last year, too, there was exactly such a profusion? We two sat here and made a huge garland of white lotuses."

"Oh, one cannot always remember everything that happened in one's childhood," I replied.

"Childhood? Why it was only last year! Do you forget so soon?"

" I cannot remember every trifle," I replied with a show of disdain.

Your voice had a mingling of sadness in it when you said, " I remember many greater trifles."

" Then you must lend me a share of your memory. I have nearly lost mine," I said with a laugh.

If I had you now near me I could tell you that my memory for trifles was even greater than yours. I remembered every look, every gesture of yours; I had got by heart all your habits, likes and dislikes. I pretended to ignore you, but I never ceased to look after your every comfort. I tried to blind you, but why were you so easily blinded? Why could you not see through my thin subterfuges?

Gradually I grew more and more scarce to you. I never had time to walk or talk with you. But as I gave up things in outward appearance, in my inmost heart they established themselves all the more firmly. I thought only of you; I worked only for you. This was my only joy, that I could still serve you though you knew it not. Seldom does

the god know of the adoration of the votary.

Every morning I went to the temple to prostrate myself before the image of the god. To him alone I confided my agony and sorrow. I told him alone of the deceit that I was practising on you, that was for your good.

This confession did not bring relief to my heart. For you, I had carried deceit even into my dealings with the god. In bitter shame and sorrow I confess it and hope for forgiveness. During the evening worship, when I stood with bowed head and joined palms before the image of the god, it was not he who filled my heart. I felt your gaze with my whole body. It flowed over me like a stream of holy water, purifying this body of its inherited sin. I felt that the end of my penance was drawing near. Purged of the sin in my blood in this life by your purifying look, I should have you as my very own when I should be born again. The conchshell blew on and the silver lamps blazed, but I had neither ears nor eyes for them; all my senses

were then steeped in you. The temple held nothing but you. Even now, every evening I feel your presence there and it fills me with rapture.

But when I returned from the temple, fear used to take hold of my heart. If I had made the god angry by my neglect of him, would any harm befall you? For punishment strikes a woman very often through her beloved. And you too had no faith in that god. You went to the temple, but not for him. We have both sinned against the god, but I was the cause of your sinning. With bowed head I supplicated to him, not for forgiveness, but that punishment might fall upon me only.

My grandfather had told me that a god can never be contaminated by man. So I decided to dedicate myself to his service. He would take care of me and maintain me, for I was determined that I would never accept the property which by right belonged to you. I dreamed of myself in the future as living in a little hut by the side of the temple and from there witnessing your home life made

beautiful and happy by some fortunate woman. But who knows if ever the dream will come true? All the probabilities seem against it. Yet I cannot give up my dream, and I am taking care of your house and property in the hope that one day I shall be able to make all over to you.

Long years have passed since I first began to sweep and wash the temple stairs and decorate them with flowers. Though I am the lowest of the low, yet I am allowed to serve thus. Every evening I wipe the accumulated dust of the day from off the stairs with my own hair. It is nothing but a habit now. For I know that the last particle of the dear holy dust has long been blown away by the wind.

The temple is no longer so crowded now as it used to be in your days. Only a few old women still persist. And of the innumerable young village folk who thronged here every evening and made my entrance nearly impossible, not one is seen any more.

A great storm ravaged the country-

side that year. On the day of the storm, it grew dark even before evening. During the night several large trees were torn down by the violence of the wind, many boats were wrecked and the river wildly broke down its banks. It was a mad dance of the elements, and man trembled before it.

Before the storm broke, the evening worship in the temple was somehow hurried through. All the people left in haste. I alone remained for the purpose of finishing my daily tasks. But I did not know that you too had lingered behind. I never set about my self-appointed tasks before the eyes of a single human being. Not even the priest of the temple knew anything about them. So it must have come as a surprise to you.

After trimming and polishing the silver lamps of the temple and washing the back stairs, I came round to the front. I knelt down and swept the marble steps with my hair. The last rays of the departing daylight struck upon my white and gold sari and made

it glow. This attracted your eyes and you came forward and asked, " Sunanda, what makes you kneel here before this god of stone?"

The truth rushed to my lips. But I held it back. I must not tell you the truth before the day of final parting. So I said, " My god has made me kneel here."

Suddenly you cried out, " What is this? Why do you sweep the stairs with your hair? Who is the fortunate being, the dust of whose feet dare to aspire so high?"

I laughed and said, " Do not you know that to a woman her beloved is above God?"

In the dark I could not see your face. Your voice was hoarse as you said, " What has he given you in return for this?"

" I do not keep count of that, I am satisfied with giving."

" So you have given away all to him? Have you kept nothing at all for others?"

I replied, " No, when we give, we give all."

Then you said, " Sunanda, is there then really no hope for me?"

I replied, " Indeed! What is it that you expect from me?"

You went away without another word. I too left soon after.

All through the night I lay awake, listening to the crash of thunder, and the roar of the river as it broke down its banks. The rain fell in torrents and at intervals the crash of a large tree, as it was uprooted and flung to the ground, penetrated to my room.

Next morning, as I rose and looked out, I could scarcely recognise the long familiar scenes. All the old landmarks were gone, broken or washed away. Many houses had fallen, many lives were lost. But the havoc outside was nothing to the havoc in my heart. For that day I lost all.

Since then I have not set eyes upon you. I have not given up waiting. I want to tell you everything before I go. Perhaps, if I am not fortunate enough, this letter will tell you. I want once more to see your face, the smile kindle

in your eyes; and I want myself to laugh once again from the heart as I used to. Then I shall die content, with the memory of this last meeting blooming like a white lotus in the sea of tears which I called my life. But I wonder, will so much be granted to me, who have been denied all from my birth?"

The Cake Festival

I

Evening was closing in. The angry look of the red sun was gone. Like a spot of vermilion at the edge of the sky, it spread a soft radiance over the world. Seated on the floor of the husking shed, Surama, the widowed daughter-in-law of the Dutt family, was winnowing the paddy. Two peasant girls of the neighbourhood were treading the rice-husking pedal. Thump, thump, the pedal danced on, pleased with the touch of their feet. Now and then, Surama would lay aside her winnowing fan and cast a look at the dusty grey road on the other side of the field to the west. As she did so, the peasant girl Pheli kept asking her in tender tones,—"Why are you so impatient, *Bou-than*? (Elder sister-in-law)* ? Why do your

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* In Bengali village society, it is usual even for those who are not blood relations, to address one another as if they belonged to the same family.

thoughts wander? Gopal *Dada* (elder brother)* will come directly."

A thin dark-complexioned boy now appeared on the scene with some books under his arms. His head was covered with tangled hair, and his eyes were large with a helpless fawn-like look in them. He was somewhat tall for his age, but his face was soft and full like a baby's. Despite his stature, no woman could see that face without pressing his cheeks in caress.

Before Surama could raise her eyes, Gopal threw the books into a big wicker-basket and began pulling at the fringe of her cloth. A bunch of keys instantly passed from it into his hands. And then what a dance! What fun! " Give them back to me at once," cried Surama, stretching out her hand. " You'll lose them and I'll have to search everywhere!" The more she called out to him, the more he danced to and fro before her and cried—" No! No! No!

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* In Bengali village society, it is usual even for those who are not blood relations, to address one another as if they belonged to the same family.

I've got them now! And I won't give them up. Promise you'll give me four annas! Or else I'll run off to the Talpukur (the lake of plams)." And he began to race away at once. Surama ran close at his heels, crying, as she went, "Stop, stop, you naughty boy! No! Don't do it, there's a dear! Don't please! *Do* give them up!"

While she was running across the large court-yard facing the pedal-shed, the voice of the postman rang out from the door: "A letter for *Bouma* (daughter-in-law)!" She hurriedly drew her veil over her loosened hair, and as she put her hand forward from behind the door, Gopal suddenly appeared, and snatched away the letter. He stepped into the yard, letter in hand, and shouted, "Oh, it is addressed to you, *Bou-than.* Tell me who has written it! Let me open it!" He was all impatience! Who could know what fresh news it had brought! And to wait, letter in hand, without knowing it at once,—could any boy's patience survive such a test? No, he would not wait,—no, no, not for a

second! He must know at once. She would first go to her room, then open it, and then read it; and then might or might not show it to him at all. That was not to be endured!

Surama, however, betrayed no such impatience. At the very mention of the letter, her face seemed to grow pale and thin. She made no answer, but quietly put forward her hand and took it. A glance at her face and Gopal instantly grew calm. He could read every expression. He saw there a portent of evil, and his soft liquid eyes instantly grew sad. He probably was never clearly conscious how every pang of hers touched a chord in his heart; but the secret touch of pain in her always checked his high spirits, and cast a shadow on his child-like face.

"I suppose there's nothing funny in that letter?" said Gopal, as he entered the room.

"No," says she.

"Oh," says he and runs out of the room instantly, but steals back, neither knowing when.

" But who has written it? "

Hearing the question, she said at one breath, " It is from my father's house. I'll have to go there."

" And I? " asks he eagerly, with a slight start.

" You'll have to stay here, dear."

" Alone?" he pouts, his face clouded. " You are not coming back, perhaps? "

Who knows whether his voice grew thick as he spoke? Surama thought it did. She thought it choked a little with tears, and instantly her own eyes filled before his. But what would the boy think if he saw? She must speak with a smile on her face.

" Why shouldn't I come back? " she replied. " Of course, I'll come back, dear, very soon." Then she tried to laugh. " You'll have to stay, darling, as you've got your lessons, you know. Could I leave my little brother otherwise? "

Gopal did not like such caressing words. He had grown up, and coaxing made him blush. Forcing a laugh he said with unconcern; " Very well. What

do I care? Go away by all means! It won't matter to me. You think I can't get on by myself, do you? Well, you leave me the key of the cupboard, ask Pheli to light the stove and wash the dishes, and I'll do the rest, and get on quite well without you. But do leave a rupee behind when you go. I've got to be at the fair at Sashipur. Do you hear? And don't forget about the stove. I can't light it myself."

Thus counting over the pleasures of his future house-keeping he went out. Surama, however, did not quite like his words. She herself wanted him not to cry; otherwise it would be difficult to leave him behind. But still, strange to say, her heart yearned for a little sob, and for some troubled look in his eyes. She was going away, and Gopal kept playing the part of wounded affection with only a word or two of protest, and forthwith started a merry tune. Her heart wanted him to be a good boy, who gave no trouble when she went away; but the heart of her heart wanted him to be a bad, naughty, obstinate boy, who

gave her no end of trouble when she went away. Why did he disappoint her? If he were really happy, well and good; let him be as merry as he liked, after she had gone. But oh! if he had only wept a tear or two before she left! "Of course he *is* sorry!"—she said to herself at last. "There can be no doubt about *that*! This was only his pretence, lest I should be unhappy. He must be deeply hurt, poor boy! Oh yes, he is! Or why should he start like that? And didn't he go away in a kindly hurry?—Ah! he wanted to hide his tears!"

At dinner, after night-fall, Gopal said nothing. Surama came out of the kitchen, and shading the lamp with her cloth went across the verandah and came into the bed-room. She put down the lamp on the shining brass lamp stand, and was engaged in making the bed when Gopal stole into the room. The plates on the wooden bathing-seat were shining in the dim light; and Gopal, after lingering near them for a little while, suddenly began to twist a lock of her hair round his finger.

"Oh! What are you doing? It hurts!" she cried.

"When does the cake-festival come on?" he asked abruptly. "You will come back then, won't you? Who else will make me cakes?"

That one word of affection touched a heart hungry for love. It was not an appeal for cakes. It was a piteous cry for herself. She answered at once. "Oh yes, dear! I'll surely come then, and make you ever so many cakes! My parents are old, and can't eat half as many as you do."

The boy was very glad. Surama understood.

That night, as they lay on a pair of bedsteads placed side by side, how much they had to talk about to each other! Surama was practically a listener through-out, while Gopal was the speaker. Her spirits were depressed by the bad news she had received from her father's house, and the effort of hiding it made her somewhat silent; but lest the hard touch of her silence should choke the gush of his gay laughing chatter, she

said a word or two now and again and thus kept the flow going.

His stories went on in endless succession. The story of the unknown blind beggar who sat singing to himself at the gate of an almost forgotten fair, nobody knows when, and the tragic ballad he sang with such pathos; the boat race on the *Bijaya** day; the delights of hot parched rice and peas as he sat by the fire in a cold winter evening well wrapped in *dolai*; the endless miseries suffered by the boys at the hands of the village schoolmaster; and a thousand other things, followed in bewildering confusion. The pleasures and pains, the tears and smiles, associated with those memories, seemed as though they would never come to an end. Suddenly in the midle of a story, Gopal said—" By the way, do you know why I was so late coming home to-day? Jadu *Moyra* (confectioner) was telling our teacher that an *Arkati* (a coolie-recruiter) had come to our village. I wondered what sort of a *kati* (stick, it

* The last day of the Bengali Durga Puja festival.

was! I had never seen one. So off we ran to the milkmen's quarter where we heard he could be found near the indigo factory. None of the fellows could beat me in running, you know. But what do you think, we saw? Not a *kati* at all, but a big fat man, wrapped in a pair of sheets, who sat comfortably by a huge fire of chaff and straw, stretching his limbs. And they all said that this man was the *Arkati*. They thought me a fool, and tried to make me believe whatever they liked. But I am not to be taken in like that. I went straight to the man and asked him, " Please sir, have you heard, they call you a *kati*." The man burst into a laugh. He laughed, and laughed, and laughed, and his huge stomach shook with laughter. What a sight he was! More like a big Dacca jar than a man."

" Was he?" Was the brief response of the sister-in-law.

Early next morning, before the crows and koels had begun their cry, Surama was already out of her bed. Gopal lay cuddled up under the blanket,

his knees under his chest, and his arms clasping a pillow, fast asleep. A smile was playing on his lips. Obviously the enormous jar of that recruiter's body, shaking with laughter, was keeping up a supply of laughter in his dreams. Surama covered him with an expensive embroidered quilt and went out of the room. Even at that early hour, you could find a few of the young housewives of the village at the tank at the back of the house. The eldest daughter of the other branch of the Dutt family came up, rubbing her eyes, and as she saw Surama exclaimed:

"What! Are *you* up so soon? I hope there is nothing wrong with Gopal."

"Oh no, he is all right," Surama replied. "But my father is very ill. No ordinary illness this time, but smallpox. I am very anxious about it. I must start to-day at noon, and catch the night train."

"Your father, Ah! Ah! he is a good old man. May Sitala (goddess of smallpox) spare him," said the daughter of the Dutts.

"I was going to see you, sister," Surama said with some hesitation. "I can't take Gopal with me. If only you could keep him for a few days,"—

The sister was in a pleasant mood. "Of course, I will," replied she. "It is nothing at all uncommon for a sister to keep her little brother for a short time!"

Surama now gently came to the point. "You know sister," whispered she, "your little brother will not have me out of his sight for a moment. I had to tell him, I would come back on the day of the cake festival; but, between you and me, this won't be possible. That is why I was going to say,—of course, he is your cousin, you'll take care of him. But he's rather sensitive, and may cry on the festival day. Keep an eye on him, do. I know, I needn't tell you all this,—for he is your little brother, but I say it all the same."

"Certainly, I'll take care of him," said the sister. "Don't be anxious. I'll make him plenty of cakes."

At noon a bullock cart drew up at

the door. Gopal was then kneeling before his trunk, busily engaged in ransacking his wardrobe for the Sashipur fair. As he was smoothing out a crumpled silver-bordered *dhoti* for himself, Surama's small green box, and a big wicker-basket, containing four small bundles, made up of a napkin fastened at the corners, were placed on the cart. Wrapped in an old blue shawl, Surama turned the key of the inner room, and came towards the cart. As her eyes fell on Gopal, she said: "It is time for me to start, darling." He raised his large eyes and pouted; but his hands were still in his trunk. She pressed his soft cheeks and touched his forehead with her lips. He was too busy to say good bye to her, and put his head again into the trunk. As he heard the rattle of the cart, he looked up and saw his sister-in-law holding up the screen behind the cart and looking at him.

All day long her mind fluttered in anxiety about the boy. Not that she ceased to think of her father; but when the early bond of her own home had been

cruelly torn by social custom, her heart had bled for a time and then had healed again and formed new ties. Every time she pictured her father's face, there arose by its side a dark young face set in a mass of black tangled hair. The back part of the house, where a water melon trails on a bamboo net-work and shoots up a thousand endrils, was visible up to the turn of the road, and Surama looked on, her eyes fixed on that spot, as long as it remained in sight. To the last moment, she expected to see Gopal there, waving his arms and calling her back, like the naughty boy he was! But he did not come. "Ah! perhaps he is crying," thought she. "He is lying with his face on the floor, in tears." And she longed to rush back to him and wipe away those tears with a thousand kisses! But Gopal was then lost in thoughts of the Sashipur fair. "The poor darling wanted to hide his tears! That is why he would not speak or say good-bye to me." And in her mind's eye she read, in the helpless look of his large eyes, a thousand mute appeals. That single

glance with which he looked up from the trunk with pouting lips, came back to her, as a silent complaint; and her eyes filled with tears.

A smiling field of maize lay before her stretching out its golden limbs amid the dust. As the cart lumbered by, she thought of another day in the month of December long gone by. That was before her marriage, when she, a little girl of ten, came to this very village with her cousin, across a field of golden corn, to see the home of her cousin's husband. One day, they went to visit the Dutt family and to see the new baby. That was the first time she saw Gopal in his mother's arms. She recalled how, as she bent down to look at the little thing, her hair, curling up her neck, hung down to its soft hands, and how,—nobody knows what it saw in her,—the baby caught her ringlets in its tiny pink hands with a ripple of laughter. Really, did he know her, even then? Who could have told at that time how she would be married into this very family, and how this little one would be all in all to her?

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At thirteen, during her first visit to her husband's home, her husband died, and she became a widow. That very year, her husband's sister was married and went away to her father-in-law's house. The mother, stricken by the great sorrow of her son's death, took to her bed, never to leave it again. Thus left alone, in his third year, the baby clung to Surama, his sister-in-law, as his only stay. That is why she, a darling of her parents, could not go back to them and seek even a few days' solace away from that desolate home of her husband. The ever unhappy Bengali widow, Surama, took the boy into her life as her very own. If she had searched into her mind, she would have found no answer to the question of what Gopal was to her. He was not her son, not her brother, nothing; but still he was her all, the delight of her heart, the apple of her eye. She could, no doubt, recall the face of her husband,—the handsome blushing youth, who came one day in a palanquin of state, while the conches blew and the *nahabat* played, and in crimson

bridal silk stood by her side. That sweet face still illumined a corner of her heart. But the happy memory of a single festal day cannot fill a woman's heart. She wants a living touch, and if memory alone is to be her stay, it must be the memory of a whole man, a full man, round whom a thousand pleasures, pains, tears and smiles, whims, fancies, caprices and moods, have clustered. She never had that mate of a brief festal day amid these. Thus it was round this boy that all the raptures of union and the pangs of separation sounded their notes. The husband smiled still, loved by her fancy like a distant god; but this boy, her daily companion, stood near her heart, filling with a living human touch the aching void in her life.

II

It was the last day of *Pous*. Surama was seated by her father's bed, nursing him; but whenever an opportunity came, her mind flew back to that desolate home of the Dutts. She was to have returned to Gopal that very day; but this, alas!

was not to be. The fair at Sashipur was over. The charm of the music, the dream of a thousand lights, had vanished; the golden fetters which could keep Gopal chained to his village had burst. His vacant mind, free from its spells, sought to fly to his sister-in-law; it yearned for a nearer consciousness of her caress and reproof amid the details of daily life. But his young heart did not clearly know its hidden want. He was now angry with Surama, now pouting his lips at the thought of her neglect, and the cakes at his cousin's house had lost all their sweetness. It was too bad of her to break her word! Why hadn't she come, even to-day? Really, that was too bad of her! It was too bad! He would not stand it! He would go and drag her home somehow or other. In a fit of anger, Gopal went to the length of composing a letter.

III

It was a morning in January. The court-yard of Surama's father's house was blazing in the sun. All the little

children of the family were seated on the ledge of the kitchen with their backs to the sun, eating cakes and making a deafening noise. One little fellow, wrapped in a check shawl fastened at his neck with knots, had a stream of treacle trickling down his dress. Up the quilt of another a swarm of ants was marching, eager to join in the feast. One over-cautious youngster was carefully saving his best cakes to eat them at leisure; while another, more greedy, having quickly finished his own plate, was now leaning over his hands pressed on the floor like paws, wistfully contemplating the beautiful fullness of another's plate. For the last few days, Surama had been fighting Death and had at last snatched her father from his clutches; but to-day, when there was a chance of his recovery, her tired eyes were heavy with sleep, and she sat curled up at the door of the kitchen, drowsing. She dreamed in one of the snatches of sleep, that Gopal was saying: " *Bou-than,* I got no cakes this year to eat. I'll never speak with you again,

never; I am rid of you forever!" Surama awoke on hearing the postman's call. "Aunt," cried a little fellow, handing her a couple of letters smeared with treacle, "Here are two letters for you. Just fancy, two!" Gopal's handwriting startled her into pleasure, and she hurriedly opened the letter and read:

"*Bou-than,*

You are very naughty. Wait, you'll see the fun. I'll teach you a lesson. So you are coming on the *Pous Parban* (Cake Festival Day), didn't you say? I start to-morrow morning, and drag you here by force. Serve you right!"

She grew anxious, as she thought with whom so little a boy was coming: but carelessly opening the other letter, she read,—

"Dear Sister,

I am anxious, because I have not heard from you for so long. Relieve my anxiety by sending some good news about yourself. On the *Pous Parban* Day, I made cakes all day long, remembering you were not here, and gave Gopal a good feed. But he ate them

with a kind of heavy face. At night, however, when he went to bed, he looked quite cheerful. I have not the courage to tell you more; but this morning, when I found his bed empty, I had an uneasy feeling. A search was made, but he could not be found. A fisherman, who had gone out to catch fish before daybreak, tells us that he saw a boy, like Gopal, going along the road to the railway station with that coolie-recruiter, while it was still dark. I learnt, on enquiry, that that recruiter also had left the village. Do take action quickly."

Surama sat petrified, with the letter in her hand. A little tender face rose before her eyes, and the mischievous smile on its lips seemed to shake its finger at her, saying, "Served you right!"

The Letter

It was a mercy that my father, when he died, left behind him a well-filled money bag, for otherwise I fail to see how I could have maintained myself in these days of expensive living. I cannot say that I was totally without training or without knowledge of any kind, but what I possessed could scarcely be called the gift of the Muses.

Even in the days of my childhood the crooked path always appealed to me far more strongly than the straight one. My conduct left much to be desired on the score of goodness and obedience. I never was content with the food which was offered me, as the model good boy in our Bengali primer always used to be. Though in one respect I certainly differed from the bad boy, held up to eternal obloquy in the very same book; for I never teased my mother to procure for me the good things which I hankered

after; I was quite up to the task of procuring them for myself. Nor can I say that the commandment, " Thou shalt not steal," was very strictly observed by me.

My parents alone can account for the whim which led them to call such a child Sushil, " Well-behaved." And Dame Fate alone can tell why she chose me of all persons to be the hero of a romance, when there were so many well-educated and handsome young men—who had read all the eastern and western romances—to be had for the mere asking. I was ill-equipped for the part, a ne'er-do-well and a rascal.

Animesh, on the contrary, really had some accomplishments to his credit. Even before leaving our " Mess," he had already composed an astonishing number of verses, which unfortunately no one had listened to with patience, with the single exception of myself. He nearly went bald in his frantic efforts to make his hair curl, and he never ceased to wonder to the day of his death, why the Creator took it into his head to imprison

his romantic soul in the flesh of a body which better befitted a Marwari cloth-merchant.

I cannot imagine what led me to make friends with such a fellow as Animesh. His own motive, I suppose, was gratitude. I listened to every verse he ever wrote. I was the only person who ever praised his singing; while his handwriting, which seemed to others nothing but black and white drawings of an army of ants on the march, was at least legible to me. I have lost count of the number of his essays, stories, poems and letters which I copied out for him in his fat leather-bound books. As a boy I had taken great pains with my handwriting, though of course with no good intention. It was to imitate the handwritings of my fellow-students and teachers, and so well did I do it, that nobody ever found me out. It was a great weapon in my armoury; it served both offensive and defensive purposes. I could imitate voices too, and with the help of these two accomplishments, I had somehow struggled up to the college

classes with the skin of my back still intact.

But I am forgetting that I am not a celebrity and should not be so ready to write an autobiography which no one would care to read. On the other hand, I am sure that I shall find listeners if I tell a story. And these days, time hangs heavy on my hands, now that I have lost my only occupation, Animesh, to wit. And I want to tell people how it happened.

That year our *Puja* vacation kept on being extended until it touched December. It was all due to the influenza epidemic. Now I returned to Calcutta in expectation of the College reopening and now I went back to Sealdah station with my bag in hand. After three or four times I tired of the sameness of the joke and resolved not to go back home again. The Mess was almost empty, for nearly all the boys were away home. The doors of the unoccupied rooms stood ajar, the cook and the servants came and went their own sweet will. Two or three times a day I would

go to a neighbouring sweetmeat-vendors' to satisfy my hunger, in the evening I went for a walk, and for the rest of the livelong day did nothing but sleep on my dirty bed.

It was noon, and I was trying my utmost to sleep. A mosquito kept biting me on the neck with exemplary perseverance, but I felt too drowsy and lazy to raise my head and punish it. I only rolled my head from side to side in a vain effort to preserve peace at any cost. Suddenly there was a commotion on the stairs. Something heavy was bumping up and a voice was heard, " Really this is beyond all endurance! "

The voice convinced me that it could be none but Animesh. Calcutta had not its equal; it was unequivocably that of Animesh. I forgot the irritating mosquito and jumped up. In a few minutes my bosom friend stumbled into the room with a number of bags and bundles and shouted : " Thank God, you at least are here! "

Now you see, that was why I could never do without Animesh, good for

nothing though he was. To be sure I was no better. But I was human. Did'nt I like to have at least one who I knew would always be glad to see me? I had a peculiar partiality for Animesh, knowing that I was of special importance to him; though to be honest, I must add that I sometimes found the weight of his love rather too much to bear. So now I welcomed him with extended fan in token of my great joy. After bathing in the cold water of the kitchen trough and stuffing himself plentifully with provisions brought from the sweetmeat-vendor he recovered his composure. Then I threw myself again upon my discarded bed and asked : "Now then, how did the rustic Muse inspire you?"

Animesh wore a profoundly mysterious look as he said, "No, I had business of another sort." He began to smile and look wise.

Animesh and business! "May I not hear what the business was?" I asked.

"I am thinking of writing a book about the re-marriage of Hindu widows,

in a simple style. The language and style of Vidyasagar is too stiff for the common people, and they all avoid reading his book."

I had to sit up. I should not have been more astonished had my torn quilt suddenly turned into an airship and flown away with me. At my evident bewilderment Animesh exuded self-satisfaction through every pore of his flabby body. After sitting silent for a minute or two, he said : " All right, we shall talk about it this evening. Now I am off to Maniktollah, I have some business in that quarter."

He went. As soon as his steps had died away, I jumped up and taking hold of his torn canvas bag I emptied it on my bed. I could have opened a cheap-jack's stall with the things that fell out in a shower from that bag. There were books, papers, manuscripts, soiled linen, combs, brushes and I know not what else. I pushed aside the clothing and began to hunt amongst the papers. After long and arduous search I found what I sought, and put back his things

in the bag. Then I returned to my interrupted sleep. I know that according to copy-book maxims, I did wrong in investigating the contents of his bag, but I am afraid the sense of sin did not prevent me at the moment from having a good sound sleep.

Animesh had changed. He was always busy. He came in and went out at his pleasure and I ceased to be of the least importance to him; one could have thought I had never copied out his poems, never listened to his songs nor even discovered for him a hundred ways of reducing his excessive fat. Though I had never written a book about the re-marriage of Hindu widows, still this much I knew, that authors do not generally choose gilt-edged and decorated note paper on which to write their books. I felt an increasing desire to know where these manuscripts went and how the fortunate recipient succeeded in deciphering them. At last I could restrain myself no longer and asked Animesh outright: " Don't you want your manuscripts copied?"

Animesh turned his naturally round face almost into a circle in his excess of gravity as he replied: "Do not disturb me now with your nonsense. You break the chain of my thoughts." I wanted to break his head for him. Chain of thoughts indeed! But just at that moment the servant entered with a telegram for me.

I opened it and found that my mother was seriously ill. I had to hurry off almost at once. Animesh was beside himself with joy. He hunted up the time-table and found out which would be the best train. I said nothing to him, but to myself I said: "Let me just return after seeing my mother out of danger. And then if I don't clear your head of all chains of thoughts about the re-marriage of Hindu widows, I will know that I have justified the name of Sushil which my fond parents gave me."

I reached home and found that though the fever had left my mother, she was still too weak to be left alone. The doctor strongly advised a thorough

change of air, otherwise he would not answer for the consequences. And meanwhile Animesh would go on writing his book.

I am afraid I felt rather annoyed with mother. Could not she have fixed upon some other time to be ill? But her pale, thin face silently pleaded with me, and, angry as I was, I could not leave her and go off to Calcutta to look after Animesh. I packed the boxes and tied the bundles, grumbling profusely all the while, and started with her for a change of climate.

It matters not the least where we went. In our great hurry we could not wait to choose a suitable house. A relative of ours had a house, which fortunately fell vacant just at that juncture, and we gladly accepted his offer.

The house was very much in want of repairs. The shutters and blinds were for the most part broken and the roof leaked in so many places that the walls of the rooms looked like striped linen on account of the constant dripping of the rain water. Dirt, filth and spider's

webs abounded. On the other hand, the house had some good points too. As it was very large, we easily found one or two habitable rooms. We were only three in number, I, my mother, and my parentless nephew Raju. So we did not need much room. The second good point was that the house was surrounded by a large garden, which was totally uncared for and had a rank growth of weeds, grass and flowers, and I am sure had Animesh been there, he could have compared it with a neglected and forlorn damsel and composed verses about it. The third advantage was that we were fortunate in our neighbours. There were three or four families of the milk-men caste settled just beyond the boundary line of the garden. So we got an abundant supply of milk and butter. A maid-servant, too, was procured from the same locality and she was a great help to mother. Single-handed she did all the work of the house-hold, besides performing the onerous task of telling ghost-stories to Raju. So mother could enjoy her much needed rest.

At a little distance from ours there stood another tenantless house. Its condition, too, was something like that of our own, but as it had the good luck to have an up-country gardener, it was not quite so forlorn. In a few days there grew up a fast friendship between Raju and the old gardener. Raju must have inherited the capacity for forming absurd friendships from his uncle, otherwise he could never have discovered much attractiveness in that greyheaded Gayadin.

A month went by. Mother was fast losing her pale, thin looks and recovering her former healthy appearance, and I hoped that within a month I should be able to return to Calcutta after sending mother back to her village home. In the meantime, I whiled away the time with the help of the fish and milk of the country and with long walks. And I slept to my heart's content.

After enjoying my morning tea I was on the point of starting for a walk, when my mother said: "Do take Raju with you. The maid-servant has gone away early today on the usual excuse

of a niece's marriage. The child will either roam about in the sun or break his limbs falling from a tree. I have grown too old to be able to look after such a boy."

I went in search of Raju. And after going over the whole house and garden, I found him perched on the branch of a guava tree. I captured him and started for my walk.

Raju's manner of walking was his own. He never took a straight course, but followed what in geometrical language would be called a diagonal line. So rather than let him walk in his own fashion, I took him by the hand and began to walk across a large field.

Something round and hard kept on hitting me on the leg. What on earth could it be? I looked down and found that some round objects were vainly trying to burst away out of Raju's coat pockets and were the cause of this bumping. "What is this, Raju?" I asked.

Raju answered shortly: "Guavas."

"What do you want with so many? Couldn't you have left some of them at

home? Your pocket is nearly bursting."

Raju treated my suggestion and latter question with a supreme indifference and said: "I shall eat two myself and give three to Molly."

Now who on earth was Molly and whence had she appeared on the scene? There were some Christian families living in the place and there might be Mollies among them. But they lived too far off to be accessible to Raju. So I had to ask again; "Who is Molly, Raju?"

Raju pointed out the house, which had stood so long tenantless by our own, and said, "She is their baby."

I looked at the house attentively, and now saw that unknown to me it had already found occupants. A number of sarees and other feminine garments, the names of which I did not know, were hanging in front, drying in the sun. A figure appeared at the gate, and it seemed to be that of a girl child. No sooner had Raju caught sight of her than he uttered a yell of delight; "There

is Molly! I'll go and give her three whole guavas." With this he tore his hand free and darted like an arrow across the field.

I had strict injunctions not to let Raju out of my sight. So I followed him, though not at the same pace. As I came close to the house, I found that I had suspected Molly unjustly. She belonged certainly to our orthodox society and proclaimed the fact in every item of her dress and ornaments. The other inhabitants also seemed to be of the same type.

Raju had become thoroughly engrossed in the joy of eating his guavas in the company of his little friend and refused to budge. I was standing there helplessly by when an old gentleman came out of the house. He stared at me for a minute or two, then came and bowed to me. "We have just arrived," he said, "Do you live here, sir?"

I told him in short the history of our coming and after a few minutes' conversation, succeeded in getting hold of Raju and started back home. On the

way I discovered from Raju that Molly had given him five pears, the day before yesterday, and that she had two elder sisters and three elder brothers, of whom the first was good and the second too. But the third always filched everything away from Molly. So she had to take shelter behind the pillar of the gate whenever she had anything extra good to eat. Children have no nonsense about them. If they want to go to some one, they simply do so. A guava, pear or anything serves as an excuse, because they understand naturally that the desire is the really important thing and the excuse is nothing but an excuse. It is a more difficult world for the grown-ups. If we went near one another or talked to one another on the simple plea that we wanted to go or talk we should be set down as fools by the wise ones of the world. They have learnt that the mere wish is nothing, and the lamest of excuses is of greater importance.

But for all that, the two families did come to know each other, though not so soon and not so simply as Raju and

Molly. The old gentleman even invited me once to dine with him. Since coming to this district he had scarcely seen the face of a fellow Bengali, so mine had some attraction for him. In the course of conversation, he told me that his second daughter was suffering from a serious disease. The doctors had nearly given her up, but still the parents had brought her here, hoping against hope that a change of climate might do something for her.

I tried to reassure him, holding up my mother's case as a great certificate for the re-invigorating power of the climate of the place. I do not know whether he found any comfort in my remarks, for the topic of his daughter's illness was soon dropped.

Molly's mother and eldest sister called on my mother once or twice, while Molly herself gradually became almost one of our family.

One day I had just finished my afternoon nap, when the postman brought in the letters. Molly was standing there, busy sharing a half-ripe guava with

Raju. Suddenly she left it and flung herself upon the postman crying, " Give me a letter."

" But I have no letters for you," said the postman.

" Give me one, I want to give one to my sister," cried Molly in a shrill voice.

The postman smiled and went off with his letter bag. Molly then snatched a letter from my hand and said, " Uncle, may I have this one? "

I recovered the letter in great haste and said, " What do you want with it? "

" I shall give it to my sister. She weeps everyday because she does not get any letters. Mother scolds her, my eldest sister scolds her; still she weeps and weeps."

Molly was letting out the family secrets in her innocence of heart. In order to divert her thoughts into another direction, I said, " But your sister would not like this letter. Her name is not written on it."

My reasons had no effect on Molly. She looked at me with eyes full of tears

and said, " Why don't you write her name on it? Then it will be her letter, won't it? "

What a little pest! I said, " Molly, I don't know how to write your sister's name. And aren't you going home to-day? It is already getting dark and your mother will scold you if you stay out any longer."

The night had been unbearably cold and towards the morning I was clutching the blankets tightly about me and trying to make up for lost sleep, when all of a sudden I felt a small cold hand brush against my neck, and Molly's voice whispered, " Look here Uncle, here is a letter with my sister's name on it. Now please write her name on another letter and give it to me."

I never was in such a fix. And I never came across such a child! What was it to me whether her sister wept or not? I was just going to give her a piece of my mind, when a glance at the letter in her hand checked me. I sat up like a good-natured person and took the letter from her.

It was written by Animesh, the friend of my heart. I could not be mistaken, it was the very same coloured envelope, the same decorated notepaper and the very same handwriting, suggesting the marching of ants on paper that could be the work of none other. But I was at a loss to understand what connection there could possibly be between my gay young friend Animesh and this village girl Nirjharinee, dying slowly of an incurable disease. " Where did you get this, Molly? " I asked.

" How silly you are, Uncle; don't I know that sister keeps her letters under her pillow? She takes them out every day, reads them and weeps. She has no new letter. Father gets new letters every day, my brother gets them, mother, too, gets them. Even I had one yesterday. But nobody writes to sister. I don't know how to write, otherwise I would have written letters every day, and given them to the postman to give to sister."

I have never been called sentimental or romantic by my worst enemies; yet

this child's words touched my heart. They do not know yet how easy it is to wound in this world and how very difficult to heal. She thought in her child's innocence that a few scratches of a pen on paper would be enough to solace her dying sister. And she did not understand this terrible hardheartedness which refused to do so little for a suffering fellow-creature. She looked at me with eyes full of entreaty and said, "Do write it now, Uncle. Write just like that and it will be all right."

It was bound to be all wrong. Still to get rid of her, I said, "Very well Molly, go and play now." Molly ran off beaming with satisfaction and joy.

I hesitated with that letter in my hand. Should I open and read its contents or leave it untouched? My curiosity triumphed at last. I pulled out two sheets of closely written paper.

The beautiful handwriting of my friend seemed to prick my eyes. And the language and the sentiments were no better. It was a wonder that anyone could weep for want of it. But perhaps

Nirjharinee had the same reasons for liking Animesh that I had. Human beings cannot live without loving someone, and the Creator has not created too many lovable people. So the sight of love being wasted on mere lumps of clay is common enough.

The letter had much of love in it. Marriage too was mentioned, but something else I found which probably had escaped the notice of Nirjharinee. Animesh was eager to know whether the father of his lady-love was ready to spare her as much of his silver as of his affections. He did not, of course, put it as plainly as that. I understood that the old gentleman had no objection to give the girl-widow in marriage again, but he did not want to lose thereby either money or his social prestige. So the love of Animesh was visibly on the wane, and tears flowed unchecked from Nirjharinee's eyes.

I put the letter in my pocket, and went to have my morning tea. After I had finished, my mother said : " I want you to take me to Nitya Babu's house.

I hear that the sick girl is worse, and I must go and see her once."

I went with mother. I could not find Raju and took it for granted that he had preceded me to Molly's house. Mother entered into the inner apartments and I sat in one of the outer rooms and tried to converse with Nitya Babu on a variety of subjects. But he seemed too despondent and sad to care for conversation and so I took my leave as soon as I decently could. After two or three hours mother returned with Raju. And it was inevitable that with Raju should come Molly in her little coloured *sari*. The gloom of her sorrow-stricken home was too much for her child's heart and she naturally took every opportunity to escape from it.

In the afternoon I sat thinking in my room. I did not know what to do. First I thought of writing a strong letter to Animesh, giving my candid opinion of him. As he wrote books about the remarriage of Hindu widows in simple language, he should have the courage to marry one. We others had not the

courage, it was true, but we never wrote books about it. However, I gave up the idea on second thoughts. Animesh had such a thick skin that my arrows would hardly make the least impression upon him. But what to do? I could not rest without doing something. How would it do to give Nitya Babu some advice. Could not I tell him that sons and daughters were of equal importance in the scheme of life, that they should be treated equally and an equal amount of money should be spent for both, etc., etc.

Just then Molly piped in my ears, "Have you written that letter? Do give it to me."

"Run along and play with Raju," I said. "Letters are not written so easily as all that."

"When will you write it then? To-morrow or the day after. Sister is going to die; she told me so to-day." And with this Molly burst out into loud sobs.

I calmed Molly with great difficulty and sent her away. I thought, and thought, but could not solve the problem,

and at last fell asleep, which gave me some respite.

When I woke, I found the whole family in confusion. Molly was the centre of the storm. She seemed like one possessed. She did not want to stay at our house, and she would not go home. She would not stand, neither would she sit or lie down. She scratched and bit Raju if he went near her, but her voice rose to an even higher pitch as soon as he tried to go away. Raju was standing there, bewildered at this display of feminine inconsistency, of which he had been hitherto ignorant. Mother was sitting on her bed looking helplessly at Molly.

I understood that Molly herself did not know where the machinery had gone wrong. I went to her and said, " Molly, if you don't stop crying, you will never get that letter, neither to-morrow, nor the day after."

Molly sat up and brushing away her tears with her small fists, took hold of my hand and came out for a walk. Raju felt immensely proud of his uncle's

tactics and he was relieved, too, at the conclusion of Molly's heroic performance. So he took out two guavas from his coat pocket and generously presented one to each of us.

As we neared Molly's home, she cried out " There is sister, sitting in the garden." She broke away from me and began to run. I looked towards the garden and caught sight of something like a bundle of shawls and clothes, behind a clump of trees. I went nearer, with the intention of having a good look at Nirjharinee, myself unseen. As I was compelled to play a part in this drama of love and faithlessness, I had a right to know the other actors by sight.

When I had come close enough, I saw that there was very little to see except the bundle of shawls. Of her face two large eyes alone could be seen and her arms were so thin that one of mine would have made four of hers. So this was the heroine of Animesh's dreams.

Molly was leaning against her chair and chattering on for all she was worth. "*Didi*, your letter will come, it will come

to-morrow. The postman will bring it in his bag, a very large one."

Nirjharinee was looking fixedly at her. After a time she asked, "How did you know, baby?"

Molly tossed her curly head and said, "Because I do know. I shall bring your letter to-morrow. Please, *Didi*, don't die."

Nirjharinee remained silent, only a few drops of tears rolled down her emaciated face. Whence came these troublesome intruders into my life? I had never read a book of poems, and I do not remember ever having been famous for philanthropy and charity. Yet here was I fretting myself to sleeplessness for this dying girl, whom even the Creator could not save? She was no relation, nor was I charmed by her looks. Still I stood there, I scarcely knew why.

We read in the Mahabharat that taking advantage of a single moment's impurity, Shani, the god of misfortune, entered the body of King Shribatsa and nearly marred his life. So, in a second,

it was with me. The same god seemed to enter my mind, taking advantage of a single moment's weakness. I do not know otherwise why I should have roamed about the house like one possessed, day after day. At the same time I had to concoct plans for escaping Molly's importunities, and there at least I displayed considerable ingenuity.

Nirjharinee, as I have said, was no beauty. And the fell disease to which she had fallen a victim was enough to scare away the most romantic imagination. Yet I could not rest without looking at her pale eager face and large anxious eyes at least six or seven times a day. And as I looked at her my uneasiness continually increased. Some one incessantly seemed to whisper in my ears: "You could do her good, but you are not doing it."

The post used to arrive at four or five in the evening. Formerly I waited at home for it; but now to escape Molly, I had taken to going out in the evening and returning late. I passed by Nitya Babu's house several times a day. My

eyes remained fixed on a certain window of the house. Just at the time when the postman was seen advancing, Nirjharinee came and stood by the window, clutching the iron bars with her weak hands. I could see her heart clearly through her eyes. And I heard even more distinctly than with my ears, what her heart prayed for. Only a few days and nights remained, then the curtain would drop upon the neglected and insignificant drama of her life. But the days passed and still she stood with empty hands. She lived on in the hope that before the unopened bud was withered completely, the south wind would come just once to whisper in her ears, and would steal a whiff of fragrance from her heart. Then she would have fulfilled her life's mission. But the days passed and a traveller advanced along the way toward her. Not the messenger of light, whom she awaited and desired. It was the terrible god of death with his deadly wand.

One day I saw that as soon as Nirjharinee came and stood by the window, her mother pulled her back from

it, saying something to her in a sharp tone. So this joy too was to be denied her. The sorrow of her perpetual and unavailing tryst was the only thing left to her, and now that was to be taken away. If I could have met Animesh then!

But I could not avoid Molly to the end. She captured me one day, suddenly in the midst of the road. She flung herself upon me like a mad creature and sobbed out: " You are bad, you are wicked. Why did you take her old letter, if you did not intend to give her a new one? I told her she would get her letter and she did not get it."

" Don't be in such a hurry, your sister is going to have her letter very soon now." Somehow I got rid of her, and hurried off. I sat down in a field and thought and thought. Nirjharinee's eyes looked as if they were wells of laughter in her better days. But the laughter had been quenched in tears. Could no one give back laughter its lost kingdom? How would she look now, if she smiled? How would she appear, if

the despair and conflict could be banished and the whole picture re-painted in colours of gladness?

Should I try? She was about to step into the realm of eternal night, should I show her for once just a streak of light? It might be nothing but a will-o'-the-wisp, but would it not suffice? She had such a very little way to travel?

So at last I wrote a letter to her. The writing was a counterfeit of Animesh's but the words were my own. I hardly know whether I loved her or not, but this much I will say, I wrote nothing that I did not feel. She was going to her bridal ceremony, where Death, the bridegroom, stood for her with open arms. Could I dare to stand as a rival to him? Still, I will say what I wrote was nothing but the truth, though it went in sorry disguise.

Thus it was that Molly's sister received her letter at last. I stood beyond the broken garden wall to watch. Her face looked wonderful that day. Laughter had come back to its own. I freely confess that I had cheated and

sinned. But it was too late to turn myself into a saint. And heaven would have remained closed to me even had I never written the letter.

Three days after, she died. My mother went and took charge of the stricken family and arranged somehow for the funeral procession. There were a few Bengalis in the place and I collected them together after a great deal of trouble. As we started for the cremation ground, I could hear Molly's broken sobs. " *Didi,* don't go away. I shall bring you more letters! "

As we were about to lift the body on the pyre, something dropped down on the ground. I picked it up. It was the letter I had written. She was taking it with her to her new home. I flung it amidst the blazing pyre.

I remained there by the pyre until the fire died down. When I returned it was already dark.

After two or three months, I returned to Calcutta. Leaving my luggage for the moment, I went in search of Animesh. He had left the mess. I

heard he was living with one of his uncles. Where had this uncle been so long, I wondered.

After a day or two, as I was on the point of starting for an evening walk, I suddenly came face to face with Animesh. " Hallo, it's a long time since I saw you!" he cried out in his hearty manner and grinned from ear to ear. He took a seat and then brought out a fat roll of a manuscript. " This will keep you busy for a long time," he said.

I took the roll, and without a word flung it deftly into the kitchen trough below.

Animesh was too bewildered to speak. Seeing that he was staring at me open-mouthed, I said, " Animesh, you had better clear out of here with good grace, otherwise you will follow your manuscript."

He went and I never saw him again.

The Broken Lily

I

The crowd was huge and the noise they made was as great. There was the large bedstead, and on it the sumptuous bedding. The air felt heavy with the fragrance of attar and gulab. All the official staff of the great Zemindar and all his servants and retainers followed behind. The two sons of the Zemindar walked barefoot to-day, perhaps for the first time in their lives. Money was being scattered liberally from time to time and the mob of ragged beggars swooped down upon it like vultures on their prey, uttering demoniac yells. And unceasingly resounded shouts of "Hari bol,* Hari bol." Large crowds had also collected on both sides of the road. It was just like a festive procession.

But that was just as it should be. It was the funeral procession of the wife

* "Chant the name of God."

of the great Zemindar, and there must not be any lack of pomp.

Yet you were born in the house of a poor father; the mother who took you in her loving arms had only shell bangles to grace herself and her dress was poor and simple. Childhood found you possessing nought but the love of parents, brothers and friends. On the day of your marriage you were adorned only with the beauty which you brought with you from the Creator. Then tell me, through what chance, what merit acquired in previous births, you came to have such a funeral, gaudy with the deep and dazzling colours of gold and silver? Would it have looked like this if your last moment had come to you in the simple village, in the poor man's house where you first saw the light of day? Perhaps one might have heard the heart-breaking wails of grief, and a cloud of sorrow might have enveloped the poor man's house in its dark embrace, or perhaps the joy and peace of some few souls might have turned into ashes at your funeral pyre, but

would you have received so magnificent a send-off to your last home? Would there have been such a crowd of followers and would the people of the great capital have looked on you with wondering eyes? And this horrible uproar, which seems to tear down the very heavens, would there have been anything like this to herald your triumphal progress to the realms of death? Then surely you ought to be counted fortunate this day! You were the favourite Rani of the great Parbaticharan Roy, the head of the great Roy family! Then why should not the fire in my heart die out along with the fire which will soon consume your beauteous limbs? What is the tie which has bound the fate of a miserable wretch like myself to yours, a tie that cannot be disolved even in death? The fire still rages in my heart, for you, my queen, though you are no more. Is this not overweening temerity on the part of a poor schoolmaster?

The procession advances on and on. I follow as one of the crowd. I have no

right to walk with the members of your aristocrat husband's family.

Something happened and the procession stopped for a moment. A tram-car or some other vehicle in front had come to a standstill. For two minutes we all stood there. The crowd on both sides pushed their way to the bedstead to look their fill at you. Two young men, college students I thought from their appearance and the number of books in their hands, pushed right to the front and then started back as if in surprise. "Such beauty in death!" whispered one to the other, "What she must have been in life? I never thought to see such loveliness except in pictures. I wonder whose house she is leaving dark."

The other nudged him and whispered pointing to me, "Hush, perhaps that is her husband." They disappeared in the crowd. The tram car had started again and we advanced once more.

Her husband! The boys were evidently young, otherwise who could have thought of me as her husband? The wise people of the world would have

laughed at them if they had heard. Just because my eyes are red, my hair ruffled and I run like one mad after her bedstead, you take me for her husband? You have not learnt yet that love has no right, can claim nothing at all, in this world. What is love compared to wealth and birth? Nothing, less than nothing. She is a queen and I am a poor schoolmaster.

We have arrived at Nimtolla. The funeral pyre was built up high of sandal wood. Her body was placed on it. Why such a smile now? Are you the exiled queen of Heaven, returning to your native land? Was it the curse of some angry sage that made you come to this earth of ours? Is it for that, that I never saw a smile on your lips while you were yet with us? And do you smile for the first time when Death welcomes you as his bride?

The fire was lit. Thousands of fiery serpents hissed out amidst the mass of her jet black dark hair. Their forked tongues darted to and fro like lightning. I covered my eyes and fled.

II

At the time, when after passing the Entrance Examination I was first admitted to a college, neither I myself nor anyone of my family ever thought that I should pass my life as a poor schoolmaster. Every one gave me the title of the "flower of the family." My mother never had a single golden ornament herself, but she believed firmly that her future daughter-in-law was sure to have diamond wristlets on her arms. Her dear Amar had won a scholarship at the first trial; so it was as good as certain that he would be a judge at least! I wonder, to whose lot fell the judgeship that was to have been mine! As for the diamond wristlets, I saw them on the wrists of someone but she was not my wife. But nothing could shake the faith of my mother; to the last, she could not believe that fate could prove so unjust and niggardly to her wonderful son.

An old tottering house, a pond and a number of poor relations, these were the sole inheritance of my father from his. To be allowed to live in our house

and to eat our food never made these relations the least bit grateful to us, for they too had inherited these rights from their predecessors. We also never dreamt of expecting gratitude from them. My father worked hard and earned some money, my mother worked harder to make two ends meet within our limited means. The rest were content to eat and look on. My parents could not afford my college expenses at Calcutta. But mother would not hear of her son doing without the training which befitted a future judge. So with a happy smile on her face she took out her bits of ornaments and handed them over to me. With these as my only means of support I ventured forth in quest of education. At that time I had hoped that I should be able to return these ornaments to my mother one day and with interest on them. But my mother has now no need of them. And I console myself with the thought that, if she had worn them, I would certainly have returned them to her.

The first part of my youth was spent

in the damp rooms of a three-storied house, which stood in a narrow lane. Some of my fellow-boarders had the power of money behind them. They would and did take their pleasures in pleasant places, but those who came like me from poor homes, could afford to have very few recreations except speaking in disparaging terms about their more fortunate companions and expressing their valuable opinion about every earthly thing. It is easy for the rich to forget their village homes when once they taste the pleasures of the capital. But for me, who had to spend most of his time shut up in a stuffy little hole of a room, with a book propped up in front of me, it was not so easy. I constantly hankered after the free and easy life of my poor home. So, though I passed a number of years in Calcutta, still in many respects I remained provincial to the last. My mind could seldom fix itself upon its immediate surroundings.

So passed a few years. At last one day I started for Howrah station, tired and hot, with a small bag containing all

my worldly wealth. I had finished my examination. I got into a train. My mother's ornaments had carried me up to this, but now my pockets were absolutely empty. I thought of entering into service if I could pass and I hoped to study privately for the M.A. All the while I sat in the train I constantly went on trying to calculate how many marks I could possibly secure. If I could pass well, then perhaps I should secure a scholarship.

I reached my village in the evening. There was only a field between the railway station and my home. It was already too dark to see so far, but I saw my home clearly in my mind's eye. By this time, my mother would be bowing down before the sacred Tulsi plant with the lighted lamp in her hand. Her hair had escaped through her veil and was streaming on the ground. My little brother and sister would have begun to tease and coax grandmother into telling them a story. The thatched roof of the kitchen could be seen dimly reflected against the dark evening sky. Perhaps

my aunt would be pacing to and fro on the verandah, as she could not stay in the hot kitchen, and my second brother Probodh would already have sat down for his evening study.

Everyone ran out to welcome me. My mother always smiled whenever she saw me but this time her joy was even greater. The family seemed to be unusually excited about something, and I soon perceived that the secret was a happy one. In the joyless and monotonous existence of a poor Bengali villager there could only happen two or three events of sufficient importance to cause genuine excitement. So I had not to wait long before learning what was the matter, for my younger brothers and sisters were only too eager to tell me. There was a talk about my marriage and a bride had been chosen. She was a poor man's daughter, but she was reputed to be the most beautiful girl in the whole countryside. My mother was willing enough to accept her with no other dowry than her beauty. As her son was sure to be judge some day, she

did not want to give him a rich and ugly bride. Everything had been almost settled. There remained only a formal visit to see the bride and to inform my father.

It would seem strange to many that the last-mentioned detail had been omitted. But there was a reason. My father used to be absent from home on business for the greater part of the year. My mother could not write, so the duty of keeping him informed about our household affairs devolved upon Probodh. But in this matter mother had no faith in Probodh. She thought that he was too young to impart the information in the right way. He would only serve to enrage my father at her lack of wisdom, and he would come and upset all her arrangements. So she waited patiently for him to come home, when she would be able to tell him everything herself; and she expected him to give in to her views. From the fact that everybody expected my father to be angry, it might be conjectured that he possessed far more worldly wisdom than my simple mother

and that he had not such faith in my future judgeship.

It still wanted a few days before he was to return. But for all that we did not need to delay our visit to the bride's house. An auspicious day was fixed upon and I with my brother Probodh and two of my friends started for their village. Mother had some respect for our new-fangled ideas about matrimony and so had no scruples in sending me.

We had been informed of two things; firstly, that the girl's father was very poor, and secondly, that she was very beautiful. Of the first we became quite sure as soon as we entered his house. The room into which we were ushered had for its furniture only two rough bedsteads of wood, covered with old shawls. The master of the house with two or three of his friends tried his best to make up for his poverty by his excessive politeness and humility. But she who would really compensate us for all our troubles, remained still behind the curtain. The old gentleman frequently absented himself; from that we guessed

that the bride was still being dressed for the important ceremony.

To while away the time, we took some light refreshments. But I was already getting impatient. How long would this prelude last? Like every other young man of the time, I too held the opinion that it was not right to marry before being able to earn one's livelihood. But the report of the bride's beauty which had made me cast such theories to the four winds of heaven, still remained to be verified. No wonder I was impatient. My companions on the other hand were enjoying themselves immensely.

Suddenly I became aware of the advent of the womenfolk in the next room. Some faint tinkling of ornaments, the rustle of dresses and similar tell-tale sounds were heard. Just as the golden glow of the twilight had begun to draw a veil of enchantment over this old world of ours, the door opened and a young girl stepped into the room.

We had already had corroboration enough of our first information, I mean

of her father's poverty; but the second was no less true. Perhaps he had borrowed some money for the occasion, but so easily had her natural grace risen above it that one failed to notice it. It was hard to believe that she had been born in this lowly cottage, yet at the same time I knew that she would not have looked quite so wonderful in a rich man's palace. It seemed to my entranced gaze that all the glimmering splendour of the twilight had suddenly taken shape before me and the evening star had come down from the sky to shine in the dark depths of her eyes.

I had heard that the girl was quite a child, about eleven or twelve, but on seeing her I understood that to be a falsehood, exacted from her parents by orthodox society.

One of my friends asked the girl, "What is your name?"

"Surama," she answered. Her voice told the others only her name, but to me it further revealed that the outward radiance of her face and form was matched by an inner radiance as great.

The girl was taken away. The father was told that his daughter had passed the trial successfully. As we returned by the village road, the light faded fast from the evening sky; but a golden twilight still reigned in my heart.

Mother was overjoyed, when she heard how pleased we were with the bride, and the girls of our house were all day listening to Probodh's description of her. But if they had come to me, I should have disappointed them. I could not for my life have told them in detail how large her eyes were, how fair her complexion, and how dark was her long and wavy hair. I carried within my heart a picture painted in the colours of light and gold, but I could not have described her in words.

The marriage had been practically settled, at least so I gathered from the increasing bustle that manifested itself in our home. My heart and imagination had steeped themselves in the colours of that ever memorable twilight and I remained in eager expectation of another dusky evening which was to

complete the work of the first. I had forgotten even my anxiety about the examination results.

Suddenly and unexpectedly my father came home. Mother broke the news to him as gently as possible and waxed eloquent over the description of Surama's nameless graces, but she could not deceive my father. He appreciated the value of money far more than he did that of beauty and consequently did not like the match at all. There followed a period of storm and strife; and the joyous strain in my heart was suddenly drowned in an ignoble domestic squabble.

My mother at last resorted to tears. She had given her word to the bride's father, how then could she now withdraw? It would be scandalous. My father melted a little at the sight of her distress, but not enough to serve any useful purpose.

There now appeared on the scene my uncle Radharaman, my father's cousin. He undertook to pilot us all through the troubled waters. He reassured mother. "Now, sister," he said,

"do not make a fuss. I shall settle everything within five minutes. My brother is the most impractical of men, and it is just like him to upset everything." I do not know what he told my father, and it was only afterwards that I guessed.

At last the day arrived. Mother sent me off, face wreathed in smiles. Our house was crowded with friends and relations. They were all on the tiptoe of expectation to have a sight of this so much-talked-of bride. I felt as proud as a victorious general—as if the beauty of Surama were in some way to my own credit.

The two villages were not very far from each other, and when we arrived it was still daylight. During the entire length of our journey, my father and uncle Radharaman were busy holding a whispered consultation. I could indeed have easily caught their words, but somehow I could not fix my attention on anything at the time.

Nobody had expected much pomp or ceremony in that poor house. Yet

even what little they had expected they did not get. Only a few friends and relations of the bride were present. The place was poorly lighted by two or three torches and a torn, dusty *shamiyana* had been put up in the yard.

The welcome however was hearty and cordial enough. My father and uncle took their seats with very grave faces. The father of the bride went about with folded hands trying to propitiate his honoured guests.

I was taken into the inner apartment, which was full of women, and presented a truly festive appearance. We men require all sorts of arrangements to enable us to be merry, but merriment comes so naturally to women that they can be joyous under the most adverse circumstances.

When the bride was brought out among the men I looked at her, but could see little except her crimson silk dress. She was now to be made mine ceremonially in the presence of all, but already I looked upon her as mine, as the gift of a certain glowing twilight. She

who had stolen into my heart in the silent evening was again being brought to me in the crowded and clamorous light.

As soon as she had been brought in, my father and uncle came forward and looked her up and down very intently. Then cried my uncle, "Where are the ornaments of the bride. Let them be brought here and shown to all."

Surama's father stammered in reply, "These are all the ornaments I could afford. You see them on her person now."

A sickly smile stole over my uncle's lips and he said, "Of course you are entitled to joke, our relationship guarantees that. But business first; bring out the jewels, let us have the ceremony over and then you may crack jokes to your heart's content."

The father folded his hands in abject humility and said, "I am unable to give more. Kindly accept these and spare a poor man."

The smile vanished from my uncle's face. "So you think to play your

trickery off on us?" he shouted. You are not content with securing such a bridegroom without paying a single pice in cash, but you must present him with a bride who has not an ounce of gold about her. Where is the watch and chain for the bridegroom? If you wish her well, produce the gifts and ornaments at once, or we shall take the bridegroom away."

The girl's father clasped my father's hands in his own and cried out piteously, "Save me sir, be kind, do not ruin a poor Brahmin, for I was told that this would be enough."

To this my father said nothing, but my uncle exclaimed, "Who told you that? We know nothing about it. As we are taking nothing in cash for the girl's dowry we thought at least you would deck her out in gold ornaments and give proper presents to the bridegroom. Do you think we cannot find another bride for our son?"

Suddenly a member of the bride's party cried out, "What an unmannerly set of boors they are? Trying to break

off their promises at this eleventh hour in order to ruin the poor man!"

Whereupon a pandemonium ensued. "What! first you cheat us and then you add insults? Get up, get up, no gentleman should stay here a minute longer." Our party swept out of the house like a hurricane. Two men pulled me forcibly from my seat and dragged me out of the room. Two or three of the lights were overturned in the rush with a crash. Sounds of weeping came from the women's apartment and mingled with the wild shouts of the men. I had fasted the whole day and this on top of my fatigue and nervous strain surely bereft me of my senses. Still I turned to have a last look of Surama. She was sitting upright on her seat; the veil had fallen from her face and she stared at me with bewildered eyes. For a single moment our eyes met and then I found myself in the dark, outside the house.

Our carriages had been waiting at a little distance. Not knowing that they would be again required so soon, the drivers and attendants had dispersed in

every direction. Everybody began to shout and swear, my father and uncle the loudest and worst of all. Only my brother Probodh remained sorrowfully silent. He too had seen Surama.

A few minutes served to bring back my scattered senses. What had I done? Why had I allowed them to use me as their tool in their brutal game? I seemed to see the sorrowful and bewildered eyes of Surama through the veil of night. They seemed to accuse me and the thought of it all goaded me into action.

While all the people of our party were busy abusing and shouting, I slipped off unseen. I soon forgot my father and uncle and their anger, and in a few minutes I reached Surama's house. The clamour had now died down and the wails of the women were no longer heard. As I approached the door, I saw two or three men coming out of the house. Their faces indicated the satisfaction of having enjoyed a good dinner. "All's well that ends well," said one. "To think of the luck of the girl.

Instead of being tied to a poor clerk's son she secures the great Zemindar, Parbaticharan Roy. Such a to-do about a few ornaments, and now the girl will be loaded with diamonds and pearls."

Another fanned himself with his scarf and said, "Of course her new bridegroom is rather old. Still what is age to a man? I think the old man fell in love with the girl as soon as he saw her, and I believe he created all that scene just for his own benefit. You know it was he who insulted the bridegroom's father." And they passed on out of hearing.

The attendants and the carriages had scarcely been collected together by the time I returned to our party. No one had missed me in the turmoil, and soon we reached home again.

I returned to Calcutta the very next day. My mother cried, but her tears could not stop me. As for the examination, I managed to pass, but I did not secure a scholarship. I took service immediately, and gave up all thoughts of further study.

III

Soon afterwards my father died. For a time our family remained in their village house and somehow or other I managed to maintain them, working day and night. But it was too much for my own unaided efforts and I had moreover to provide for the education of my brothers. So the country-house was shut up. Mother and the younger children came to Calcutta to live with me. The poor relations found other places of refuge, as we could no longer keep them with us.

Our village home was old, no doubt, but it was a large one, and had no lack of air and light. But the house which we at last succeeded in renting in Calcutta, after wearing out the soles of our shoes in the effort, had nothing to recommend it at all. Still it was better than my lodgings. In her widowed state mother did not laugh so often as before. But still the light of her sweet face made this dingy house a home for me.

Heaven knows that Calcutta is thickly populated; but friends are hard

to come by. Large palatial buildings reared their stately heads on every side of our humble home. We saw the *chuprassis* at the gate, heard the whirr of their masters' cars, and sometimes caught glimpses of the residents themselves, but to us they were like the animated pictures of the cinema. We could not think of them as living men and women.

Our house stood in a narrow lane. On the opposite side could be seen a large building of red brick with an adjoining garden. The main gate opened on to the high road, but there was a small back door for the servants which opened on our lane. My younger brother and sister soon struck up an intimacy with the gardeners and began to bring home flowers and fruits from the garden. I did not know to whom the house belonged, and the windows of the house which faced the lane were never opened.

One day when I returned from the school, I found Montu and Tara, my brother and sister, in tears. On enquiry

I found that there was to be a great feast and much rejoicing in the large house over the way. Splendid arrangements had been made to entertain the guests, and there would be no lack of music and dancing. So Tara and Montu were determined to attend as uninvited guests and mother equally determined to prevent their going. I effected a compromise and sent them off with Probodh to visit the Zoo.

I could not afford to rest long after my return from school. I had to put on my outdoor clothes again and sally forth to my private tuitions.

As I came out into the lane, I found it all alive with the bustle of preparation. The green lawn flaunted a great Durbar tent and it was shining all over with electric lights, banishing the shades of evening from the entire neighbourhood. The garden had been despoiled of all its floral wealth, which was transformed into votive offerings for the young girls who were to form the dancing party. A crowd of waiters and servants moved to and fro making everything ready for the

feast. I did not stop long to look at all this, as three boys and a geometry lesson were awaiting me.

When I returned, the feast was in full swing. The sweet voice of women pierced the silence of the evening and the air was heavy with the fragrance of flowers. The lane was packed with sight-seers and I had to fight my way through them. Every now and again they would voice their appreciation of the music with all the strength of their lungs, though the guests who had been specially invited to listen paid scant attention to it: indeed many of them were already past the stage when they could appreciate anything at all.

As I could hardly move through the lense crowd, I had perforce to stop. The whole building was festooned with ows of light. All the doors and windows tood open and light streamed out of hem into the outer darkness.

Suddenly my roving eyes were fixed n a bewildered stare. How was this! Iow came she to be here? How came his dull strange house to harbour the

flame-like beauty which my heart knew so well? How had I remained ignorant so long of her near presence?

The beautiful creature, who stood by the window and looked as regal as the veritable queen of heaven, was none other than Surama. Though I had last seen her in her father's cottage and now she stood in a great mansion, though her body seemed to glitter with diamonds and rubies and the former soft expression had given place to the hardness of a statue of marble, yet I could not mistake her. Though her flashing eyes were no longer like pools of tenderness and innocence, yet I knew her still. For a minute she gazed down on the garden beneath, and her eyes were full of bitter hatred, then she moved away and the window closed with a bang. I asked one of the by-standers, " What is happening here?"

" It is the feast of the *first rice* of the grand child of Raja Parbati Charan Roy. So he has invited all his friends. Look there, that is the eldest son of the Raja."—I looked and saw. A man who

was already nearing middle age. He had a fair complexion, was fat and his head was shining and bald. And to such a man stood Surama as a mother. "And which is the Raja?" I asked.

"The Raja? Good Heavens, do you except to see him here? Don't you know that he has been struck down with paralysis for two years or more. He can't move a step."

The fire which I had seen in Surama's eyes now seemed to light my heart. I pushed my way through somehow and reached my house. But all through the night the noise of the feast and the loud shouts of the drunken guests struck upon my ears like the shrieks of the damned.

Before this I used to think the red mansion uninhabited. Now that my interest was awakened, I began to notice that one of the windows did indeed open every now and again. Sometimes a maid-servant would stand there or a little child. She, for a sight of whom my eyes remained for ever fixed on that window, appeared there but once. She stood

there gazing intently at our house; and I wondered whether she knew.

But what if she did? She was now a Rani and I a poor hard-worked schoolmaster. But though I tried my hardest, I never could forget that it was I who was responsible for her accursed queenhood.

The days passed on, since Time waits for neither queen nor beggars. My mother was busy seeking a suitable bride for Probodh, now that he was a Master of Arts. I did not object, as I was certain that uncle Radharaman would not be asked this time to be the master of ceremonies.

We heard of many girls, but could decide upon none. Some found favour with my mother but failed to satisfy my brother; others who were to his taste, were not to my mother's. One of our neighbours had an eligible daughter. She too was talked of. Her father was poor, but that would not have mattered had the girl been pretty. As she was plain, my mother did not like the match.

It was the middle of the hot month

of Baisakh. My school had closed for the summer vacation, but my private pupils were still in the city and I had to attend to them every morning and evening. That day the noonday sky was like a fever and I had little inclination to go out of doors. Still it had to be done. The plain-looking daughter of our neighbour was to be married that very night. To carry out the auspicious ceremony the father had to raise money on his house. Evidently there were plenty who, unlike my mother, preferred wealth to beauty. As I crossed the lane, I saw that their dilapidated house was being decorated with wreaths of marigold and deodar leaves. A band of professional musicians were occupying the small verandah in front and they had struck up a merry tune, to which all the children of the neighbourhood listened with rapt attention. My brothers and sister in their best clothes had already arrived. I and Probodh had been invited too and thought of putting in an appearance later in the evening. As I was passing out of the lane I saw the back

door of the red mansion open, and a maid-servant dressed in silk and carrying presents appeared, accompanied by a small child of the Zemindar family. They were going to honour the poor man's house, which the elders of course could not be expected to do. I was already late and hurried off.

After I had finished my tuition I started homewards. The streets were already lighted, and instead of going home, I proceeded straight to the house of my neighbour.

But what was this? For a moment I thought that I had returned through the paths of dreamland to that ever memorable night of my life. There were the same brutal shouts from the bridegroom's party, the same abject entreaties from the bride's relations and the very same wails from the women's apartments. The next instant I remembered that such a scene was not after all of rare occurrence in Bengal.

The drama was nearing its last act as I approached. The bridegroom's party swept out of the house with loud

shouts and soon disappeared. They had not been paid the promised price for the boy, and so this scene had resulted. The girl had fallen forward on her seat and lay there like one dead, but nobody could spare her any attention. All were anxiously looking out for some sort of a bridegroom to save the situation. If the girl was not married now, the family would become outcast for ever.

For a moment I did indeed think of offering myself. Perhaps so I might have expiated my sins. But my feet refused to advance. On the pretext of saving the girl, was I to make her life a curse and a burden to her? What had I to offer? And yet it was terrible to listen to the heart-rending wails of grief.

Suddenly a slim and dark youth stepped forward and stood before the bride's father. "Do not trouble yourself, sir," he said. "If you agree, I am ready to marry your daughter."

It seemed as if the magic wand of an enchanter suddenly transformed everything. It was like the dead coming back to life. I gazed at the young

magician, and I wanted to clasp him to my heart. Brother mine, you made up on that instant for all that I had ever done and suffered for you. You lifted the load of guilt from my weary heart.

As soon as the ceremony was over, Probodh started for home with the bride, for he did not want mother to hear of it from any one else. I too followed.

Mother opened the door, then stood amazed and dumb. She understood at once what had happened, and her face hardened. Probodh hung his head and the poor bride was ready to sink down to the earth in her dismay and nervousness.

But how long could this go on? I felt I should suffocate. "Mother," I cried, "for my sake forgive them. If you don't, the curse which clings to my wretched life will never be removed. Your younger son has atoned to-day for the sin of your eldest and has brought him consolation. Should that make you grieve?"

Mother's eyes filled with tears, and Probodh now came and prostrated him-

self before her with his wife. The children of the house had hitherto stood dismayed and silent at the sight of their elders' attitude. Now, seeing the sky clear, they came running forward with joyous shouts of welcome to the bride. Next day the whole female population of the neighbourhood flocked to our house to see her. Their visits continued from morning to night. I was at a loss what to do, the house was very small, and, in order to show sufficient respect for the *purdah* of the lady visitors, I had to spend the greater part of the day in the street.

But it was rather difficult to loaf about the crowded streets hour after hour, and as it was already dark, I thought that I could safely return home. Who would be coming to see the bride at such a time? It was not until I had set foot inside the street-door that I saw my mistake.

Standing in front of me, was a figure clad in crimson Benares silk, and I could see the glitter of gold and jewels through the fine transparent cloth. Though she

stood with her back to me, I knew who she was. But why had the queen condescended to honour the poor man's house?

Surama had not seen me. As she reached the door of Probodh's room, the servant girl who accompanied her, cried out, " Where is the mistress of the house? Our Rani-mother has come to see the bride."

Our only maid-servant hurried out and said: " Come in mother, please come in. Our mistress has just gone to evening worship at the temple of Kalee. Please to come in and take a seat." My little sister Tara, too, came out to welcome the honoured guest. As soon as they entered the room, I hastily fled to mine, which was the very next one. I could not understand the meaning of Surama's presence.

Suddenly I heard Surama's voice, telling her own maid to leave the room. The maid went out and with her went our maid too. They went and sat in the kitchen, and began to gossip. Again Surama spoke. So bitter and wild was

her voice that I started up in fear. " Take off your veil," she cried to the bride, " and let me see how beautiful you are. What gave you the right of entry into this house? Are you more beautiful than I? He abandoned me in scorn, and let me burn in hell-fire all my life, but you he carried home to love and worship. Why? In what respect are you my superior? Have you much money, have you got diamonds and pearls? Let me see them then, so that I may know why it is he prefers you."

Tara cried out in alarm, and I hurried out of my room into the next. The new bride was sitting huddled up in a corner of the bed, her face ashy pale with fear. Surama stood in front of her, her black eyes darting fire at the poor girl.

As I stepped into the room, I called, " Surama."

She started and turned round. Then she ran up to me and cried, " Then tell me yourself since your wife cannot speak. In what respect is she my superior? In beauty, in wealth, or in virtue?"

"Surama, you are mistaken," I said, "she, is not my wife; it is my brother Probodh who has married her."

Surama uttered such a shriek that again I started; "She *is* not yours then?"

Her maid came running out of the kitchen, and she replaced the veil which had slipped from Surama's head. She said apologetically, "Babu, please don't take offence. The Rani had been in better health these last few days, so I ventured to bring her. I did not expect her to become violent again. She kept on worrying me saying, 'Bidhu, take me to see the new bride.' So I thought to humour her as she was quite calm and gentle, and see how she has behaved!"

She took hold of Surama by the arm and drew her towards the door. I followed and asked her, "How long has your mistress been in this condition?"

"Oh, for two years or more. Ever since I came she has been like this. The Raja spends a fortune in doctors, but it is all to no purpose."

They passed out and I returned to my room. No, the load of guilt could

not be put off, it was still on me. The age when one could make atonement for another's sin was no more. And how could I expiate my sin? Who could show me the way?

Days passed on. Eventually one day I heard loud voices in the red house and saw people running hither and thither in a hurry. Then people began to collect at the main gate. I went in the street and asked, " What is the matter?"

Surama, it was given out, had died of cholera the night before. It was a very sudden end. No doctors had been called in, and nobody informed. Now they were arranging for the funeral procession.

I stood there and waited. Our paths had lain far apart in life, but as she started on her last journey I went with her as a friend should—as far as I might—retiring only from the grim portals of death.

The Wedding Dress

I

" RANGADIDI!"

" What is it, Ranu?"

" Don't you know that to-day is Sushi's birthday? So they are going to hold a fancy-dress party at their place. I intend to go dressed as the goddess Lakshmi.* But I have not got a red *sari*. So mother has sent me to you. She said that you had got lots of beautiful *saris* of Benares silk."

" My dear, we are old-fashioned people. Our things would not be to your taste. You are very modern and have taken to going to the Mem-Sahib's school."

" There now, Rangadi, how you talk to be sure! What if you are old-fashioned? Pray, is not Lakshmi even more old-fashioned than yourself? Now,

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* Goddess of Wealth and Beauty.

please, do open your trunk and let me see what you have got."

I had to sit up at the urgency of my little grand-daughter's manner. I unlocked my trunk and took out nearly twenty or twenty-five *saris*. Waves of red, blue, green and pink rolled along the floor of my room, with glittering golden and silver flowers and leaves, but none found favour with the critical little girl. As soon as I took out one she turned up her nose and exclaimed: "This won't do, Rangadidi! Lakshmi won't look right in that."

I gave it up in despair and said "Then, darling, I am afraid I shall not be able to suit you. You must try elsewhere."

My little darling stood there with a sulky expression on her pretty face and showed not the faintest sign of moving. Suddenly she exclaimed, "But, Rangadi, what do you keep in that box of white stone, there by the side of the big iron safe? Something like gold is glittering between the fretwork."

That marble box! I had quite

forgotten it. It must be about forty years since that day when I first put my foot within the threshold of this room, dressed in the red silk of a bride, with tinkling anklets on and anointed with sandal paste. That little box stood then in that very place. Its colour was then like the fresh sea-foam, that crests the waves of the blue ocean; now it has taken on a yellowish tinge with the passage of time. I have gone on seeing it nearly every day of my life, but somehow it had escaped my memory.

I turned to Ranu and said, " Ranu, that was a fortunate reminder of yours. You might get the very thing you wanted in this marble box. It contains my wedding dress. I put it there the day I first made my appearance in this house and I have not touched it ever since. So long as your aunt Kalyani was alive she used to take it out frequently, shake and fold it, and make no end of it. But after her death nobody paid any attention to it any more. I will take it out for you, if the worms have left anything."

The box was secured by a small,

old-fashioned brass lock. I picked out its key after a good search among my large bunch of keys. I was doubtful whether the lock would yield to this rusty little key, but my fears proved to be false. I pulled up the lid.

Ranu cried out aloud in her delight, "Oh, what a beauty! Rangadi, I have never seen the like of you! What do you mean by neglecting such a fine thing? It is a mercy that the worms have spared it. I see only two or three small holes. But it is still quite wearable. But how is it that the box smells so beautifully of camphor?"

"Your aunt Kalyani used to keep chains of camphor beads in it."

"But what kind of an ornament is this, Rangadi? It looks like a chain of golden jasmines. Such a thing, too, you have left uncared for in this old box! You do neglect your things, I must say that. I have a good mind to run away with it, but I know mother would give me a good slap if I took away such a costly thing. Do you know, ever since I lost that ugly old brooch of mine,

mother does not let me touch a single thing. So Lakshmi will have to be content with tinsel ornaments this evening. But I must hurry, else I shall be late for the party."

My grand-daughter danced out of the room, with the red *sari*. I remained seated on the floor, in front of the open box. Somehow I felt a great disinclination to get up.

Do not scorn it because it is an old woman's life history. I too was young once. And do you know, my beautiful lady leaders, that I too had a time when people's eyes clung only to me, even if I stood among a thousand pretty girls?

II

I was born in an ancient aristocratic family. Looked at from the outside, we wanted nothing. We had unbounded wealth, a great ancestral house, retainers and servants innumerable. I was born after four brothers, so the usual want of notice and care which a girl gets as her birth portion never fell to my lot. For a long time I enjoyed all the wealth of

affection which an only baby among a family of grown-ups had a right to expect. When my little nephews and nieces made their appearances I assumed the role of aunt with due dignity and importance.

My grandmother had named me Vidyut (Lightning). Many people give the name "Lotus-eyed" to their blind children, but everybody with one accord declared that I had fully justified my name. You may be sure that I was quite conscious of the fact. I was as proud as anything of my brilliant complexion and beautiful face. My mother had a large mirror in her bedroom, and whenever I found her absent from her room I went and stood before that mirror, admiring myself. I used to lean back my head and make the mass of my dark wavy hair touch the ground, or dress it in as many fashions as I possibly could. Sometimes I held up my beautiful arms, white as alabaster and rounded as the stalk of a lotus, to the golden morning light and gazed at them with eyes of wonder.

From my very childhood I refused to put on any colours except red or dark blue—I was quite aware of the fact that these two colours enhanced the beauty of my fine complexion. My grandfather was alive then. He used to be greatly amused at my pride and say, "My dear, it will be a hard job to find out a suitable bridegroom for you, great beauty that you are. To my knowledge, there is only one person worthy of that honour, that being my own humble self."

Though the scion of an old conservative family, my father cherished many modern theories and ideas. But as my grandfather was alive, he was unable to carry most of his theories into practice. A great agitation was then going on in Bengal about the education of women. My father sided with the modern party, who stood in favour of it, but not daring to send any girls of his family to the new girls' school, he himself began to teach me and my two sisters-in-law. But the last-mentioned young ladies favoured card-playing and gossiping much more than they did their

studies. They had to make a show of studying so as not to fail in proper respect to their father-in-law, but they could never keep to it for more than half an hour. There never was any want of excuses—either their babies began to cry or some household duty required their prompt attention. But I took to my studies from the beginning. I finished all the books my father had brought into the inner apartments; then began to make inroads at night upon my father's library, which was situated in the outer apartments.

It was the custom of our family to marry the girls very early. My sisters-in-law too had been married in their childhood. But the old order changed in my case. As I was the only daughter of our house, neither my mother nor my grandmother could live without me a single day. If anybody asked any questions about my age they always gave me out to be three or four years younger than I really was and never failed to remark, "We give our girls in marriage early, not because we must, but

because we will. Nobody would dare to object if we did otherwise. We are a great Kulin family, many daughters of our house had remained unmarried their whole lives and nobody had anything to say."

So I was growing up, without any thought of my marriage. My grandmother sometimes reminded others it was high time to think of my marriage, but she received but scant hearing. I used to hear that a suitable bridegroom was being sought for, but nobody seemed to be very energetic about it. As the people around us were mostly our tenants, they never said anything to our faces, and if they said anything behind our backs, nobody brought it to our notice.

My eldest brother's marriage had taken place even before my birth; my second brother too had been married when I was quite small. My third brother was considerably younger than the elder ones, and now his marriage was about to be solemnised. My grandfather wished it to be a very grand

affair, as he was doubtful whether he would live to see any other festive ceremony of the family.

The bride-elect was the daughter of a poor house, but as she was reported to be supremely beautiful, my grandfather consented to the match. After the bride had been formally seen and chosen, he came to me and said with a smile, "My dear, you think that your beauty stands unrivalled, so you do not condescend even to look at this old fellow. As I am quite tired of your imperiousness, I am bringing home a greater beauty than even you."

I laughed at his words, but somehow I felt a little uneasy in my mind. Was she really more beautiful? Well, let her come, then I shall be able to judge.

The wedding itself was to be a very simple affair, as the bride's father was a poor man. But the preparations that were being made for the reception of the bride in our house were meant to make up for all want of magnificence in the wedding. A great feast was to be given in our house; then all the family, to-

gether with an enormous number of friends, relations and guests, was to go out to a villa, situated on the banks of the Ganges, and spend a festive week there. Ample provisions had been made for entertaining the guests with dance, music, and theatrical performances.

The day of the home-coming of the bride arrived. The festal clamour in our house was great enough to be almost deafening. A band had struck up near the outer gate, and all the children had assembled there to listen to the music. My mother and my eldest sister-in-law were busy taking counsel together over the proper management of the various rites and ceremonies. Nobody seemed to have any time to spare, and those who really did the least went about with the most anxious faces.

But what was I doing all this time? You would laugh, if you knew. I was in my own room, taking out all the pretty *saris* I had, trying on every one of them to find out which suited me most. I was determined not to own defeat to another woman. At last I decided

upon a silk whose colour was that of the clear autumnal sky, and it was embroidered all over with golden stars. I let down my hair, which reached down to my ankles and kept it from blowing over my face with a chain of sapphires tied across my brow. I did not put on many jewels, as I was quite confident that my beauty needed but few aids. It took me a long time to finish dressing. Then coming out of the room, I mingled with all the girls and young women assembled near the entrance to the inner apartments.

Suddenly the sound of loud music broke upon our ears. The procession must be quite near. What a deafening uproar! The huge procession came on slowly and stopped before the outer gate. The silver palanquin which bore the newly wedded pair entered the inner court. I pushed my way to the front of my companions, as I was determined to have a good look at the bride. My mother advanced to receive the bride. I still see her in my mental vision, as she then appeared. She looked like the

veritable queen of Kailasa, Parvatee herself, with the child Lakshmi in her arms. The girl bride was indeed beautiful! Her face seemed to be moulded out of fresh-churned butter, her eyes were those of a startled fawn.

I was gazing at the bride in open-mouthed wonder and had forgotten even to be envious. One of my numerous cousins, named Kamalini, had been standing by me. All of a sudden she remarked aloud, "Well, I admit that the bride's face is beautiful, but as to complexion, she cannot hold a candle to our Vidyut. How grandfather exaggerates!"

Why, so it was! I came back to myself with a jerk. However pretty the face of the bride might be, I stood far superior to her in brilliance of complexion and wealth of hair. I now joined in the festive ceremonies with a tranquil mind. As I bowed down to the new bride, she looked at me with her big eyes full of wonder.

The old people of that district still talk about the magnificence of my third

brother's wedding. It was truly unsurpassed there. After the great feast in the ancestral house, we started for the riverside villa in great state. A number of bullock carts started with the luggage, for my brother and his friends, elephants were procured, and last of all the ladies came in their closed carriages. A crowd of servants brought up the rear.

It was already dark when we reached our destination. We were unable to have any of the good outdoor walks we had planned beforehand, as my mother insisted upon our having supper and retiring early. I and Kamalini shared one room, my sisters-in-law occupied the adjacent rooms.

Quite early in the next morning I was suddenly roused by a good shake from my second sister-in-law. As I opened my eyes she cried out, "Now dear, do get up. Do you come here to sleep and eat? I heard that the garden had been much added to, many new beds have been planted and many fountains and marble seats have been made. Let us go and have a look at them."

Kamalini, who was already sitting up in her bed, now put in, while rubbing her still sleep-laden eyes: "But do you intend to start in the night? Why not go during the day? The garden won't run away, you know."

My sister-in-law gave me a good tug as she replied, "My dear madam, do you think the men would leave the garden in the daytime for your good pleasure and go and sit out in the fields? Not if I know them. If you want to see the garden you must come now, while they are still asleep."

Kamalini gave way, and we got up for our walk. It was still chilly, so I wrapped myself in a green shawl and went out.

The garden was a very large one, and in no way resembled the small enclosure heavily laden with flowering plants in earthen jars which we used to call a garden in our town house. This garden extended far and wide, and I felt a bit afraid at first when I stepped into it. A wealth of flower appeared on every side, the pearly dewdrops of the

early dawn still fresh upon them. As we passed under the avenue of trees our hairs, faces and mantles became profusely sprinkled as from the wet skirts of the wood nymphs, who had just left their baths. We had not advanced far when Kamalini suddenly threw herself down upon a bank of green grass by the side of a fountain of coloured water and said in a decided manner, " I cannot walk any more, you may go on, but I shall return to the house after I have rested a bit. "

Our pleadings were in vain, so we two left her and moved on.

A small hillock of jet-black stones stood nearby. It was covered all over with flowering creepers and shrubs, and a tiny stream of sparkling water had sprung out of its heart and was flowing down its side. It had formed into a little rivulet at the base of the hillock and had at last merged itself into a miniature lake, all aglow with a host of red lotuses.

We went and stood by the side of the hillock. My sister-in-law sat down upon a rustic bench which stood close

by and said, " Kamalini was right, after all. We should have gone back with her. My feet are aching all over and I am very tired. But look there, sister, what glorious lotuses! Of all flowers I think they are the most beautiful."

I had run into the habit of expressing an opinion upon every earthly subject. So I at once put in, " Whatever you may say, sister, I think jasmine the most beautiful. The lotus is, of course, superior in outward beauty; but as to sweetness of smell it must give way to jasmine."

" Oh, indeed! so outward beauty is no match for the inward one? That is something new from you. Up to now you were the greatest advocate for outward beauty, but now it seems . . ."

My sister-in-law left off in the middle of a sentence, and looking round at her I saw her veil her face with the end of her sari and rise from her seat as in a hurry. Astonished at her behaviour I turned my eyes to the spot, whence the surprise seemed to have come. Oh dear, someone had been

sitting on the other side of the hillock, and now he had risen up at the sound of our voices.

As I was the daughter of the house, I was quite unaccustomed to veil myself as my sister-in-law at once did. And to tell the truth, even if I had been, it would never have entered my mind then. The moment which stands as the One Moment of my life was not to be wasted in that manner.

Hitherto the word beauty had denoted to me but my own beauty, but now I looked at the beauty of another. What a wonderful face it was! To me it seemed to be even more beautiful than the face of the Greek statue which stood in the garden. To you it would be surprising that an ordinary Bengalee youth can possess such beauty. But remember that it was the first time that I looked at a man with the eyes of a woman. The rosy colour of the maiden's own heart lends the man a beauty which no man ever really possessed. So far I had been the petted and spoilt child of a wealthy house, and the men I had

looked upon were but my brothers, uncles and other relations. But now had come the first Young Unknown, and as I gazed at him my childhood seemed to drop from me and was lost for ever.

He looked at me with no less wonder than I suppose I did. I thought of it later on, but not then. It was but for a moment that we looked at each other. An almost imperceptible pressure of the hand from my sister-in-law made me recover myself, and I turned away with a start. He, too, at the same moment, vanished behind the dark deodar avenue. Just then the eastern sky heralded the approach of the sun with its rosy blush. There was also another sunrise—in the sky of my young life, and I returned home steeped in the glory of its wonderful effulgence.

Entering my room, I went and stood before the mirror, almost unconscious of what I was doing. Vague and indistinct thoughts kept rushing into my mind, but I was unable to put them into shape. Suddenly a voice cried from behind me, "My dear girl, you need

not study your appearance so anxiously. It was stunning enough for that poor fellow. He is sure to fall down in a swoon after he reaches his room."

With a start I drew back from the mirror. Was it really for that purpose, which my sister-in-law so clearly defined, that I had been standing before it? I could not wholly deny it.

The great rejoicings and festivities of our house were unable to claim my attention. I did not fail to notice that Kamalini and my second sister-in-law were having a good laugh at my expense, but in spite of many efforts I was quite unable to compose myself and appear like everyone else. It is certain that none except those two had any attention to spare for my unusual behaviour, and yet I was continually dreading exposure before everybody.

A great feast had been arranged for that evening. The friends of my newly married brother sat down to it with him along a long corridor in front of the kitchen. The elders took themselves off,

so that the mirth of the young people might be unrestrained. Suddenly they proposed that the new bride must serve some food to them, otherwise they would decline to touch anything. Were the family preceptor and priest alone to have that privilege and were the friends of the bridegroom of no importance whatever? My mother and grandmother laughed at their clamour and said, " Very well, let the new bride serve a bit. It is quite proper for a new bride to appear before menfolk."

The bride was brought in. She was glittering all over with jewels and silks. A large silver ladle was handed to her, which she at once dropped in her nervousness. She was all a-tremble. My mother became anxious and said, " It would never do to send her alone before so many people. She will drop down of sheer nervousness. Somebody must go along with her."

But who was to go? All the daughters-in-law of the house drew back, veiling themselves copiously. Kamalini, on being requested, cried out in dismay,

"Oh dear, I could not do that for anything!"

Nobody moved. The clamour among the guests became uproarious. My grandmother jestingly said to mother, "Why not send me along with the new bride? The two brides of Bimal may very well serve together."

My mother laughed and answered, "That would be the best arrangement, if it only could be done. But we are getting late." Suddenly her eyes fell upon me and she called to me, "Come here, dear, you go with the bride. Take firm hold of her, do not let her fall down."

"And take firm hold of yourself too, dear, see that you do not fall down yourself!" whispered Kamalini from behind.

I had been feeling nervous, but I pulled myself together in anger at her sarcasm, and went out with the bride. The young men were seated in a long row, talking and laughing aloud. A sudden silence fell upon them as we appeared. The new bride served with the silver ladle and I moved along with

her. My legs were trembling with nervousness, and my face seemed to be on fire. But yet, in the midst of that overwhelming sense of shyness, I could not help looking up once. Another person, too, just looked up at that very moment.

My mother signed to us to come back as soon as we had passed along the whole row once.

The joyous festive week went on, but it had very little attention from me. Kamalini and my sister-in-law went on making jokes for a day or two, then they forgot everything about it.

A great musical performance was held on the last day of the week. A famous band of professional singers had been engaged for that purpose. The ladies took their seats behind silken curtains, while the friends of my brother sat down in front of them, so as to keep a bit apart from the older folk.

The ladies went on feeding their babies and taking stock of one another's dresses and ornaments as they listened to the singing. I, too, did not pay un-

divided attention to the music, but neither to the small talk around me.

A great shout of approval went up as a song came to an end. My grandfather threw his own shawl on the singer and others followed suit with many rich gifts.

Such unexpected good luck made the man greedy. He turned round to the ladies in an expectant attitude with joined palms. My mother gave me two golden "mohurs" and requested me to throw it out to him. I tied the two coins in my silk handkerchief, so that they might not get lost in the crowd, and putting out my hand from behind the curtains I threw it out in the direction of the singer.

But, as good or bad luck would have it, the handkerchief, instead of falling before the singer, fell down among that crowd of young men, who had been sitting in front of us. One of them picked it up, and untying the coins presented it to the singer. But somehow the handkerchief remained in his own hands. Need I tell you who it was?

People grieve over lost property, but the joy I felt at losing that handkerchief still remains unparalleled in my life. How long I had been gazing at that appropriator of other's goods I cannot now tell. I only came back to myself as the singing began again.

The party broke up the next day. The guests and relations departed to their homes, and we too came back to our usual residence.

But one marriage seemed to have reminded the whole family about the urgency of another. Everybody became quite energetic all of a sudden to arrange a good match for me. Professional matchmakers went in and out all the day long. As I had arranged a match for myself, I felt disgusted at their presence. I did not know anything about that secret bridegroom of mine, who he was, where he lived or what he did, but somehow a conviction had sprung up in my heart that to him and to none but him would I be given in marriage. My knowledge amounted to this alone, that his name was Manindra, and this much

too I had to wrest from Kamalini at the expense of a whole day's teasing.

One evening I was seated before the window of my room and a single star was shining above the large neem tree which stood in front. Suddenly my sister-in-law rushed laughing into the room and cried out, " I have brought a piece of great good news. What are you going to give me as a reward? You need not remain staring at the skies any longer, a time is coming when the earth will have sufficient attraction for you."

I understood quite well what she meant, but as she was many years my senior I did not give any answer to her repartee, and she went off laughing. A feeling of mingled joy and fear arose in my heart, causing a tremor in my whole body.

A scene of immense bustle and noise began once more. Jewellers, goldsmiths, carpenters and clothes merchants poured into our house from all quarters. Mother one day remarked while talking to the ladies of the house, " This is my only daughter. I will send her to her father-

in-law's house with such a trousseau that the mother-in-law, however, clever she be, would have a hard job of it trying to find out defects."

Day after day passed on and the auspicious day approached. Did not I have any fear or doubt? To whom was I going to trust myself ? But as the first streak of light in the sky dispels a world of darkness, so a few words which came to my ears from the next room drove away all my doubts and fears. An aunt of mine was talking to my mother. Suddenly she asked, " But, sister, have they seen the bride?" My mother laughed and said, " No sister, we won't have to show the bride formally. The bridegroom himself has seen her and chosen her while he was here as a guest in the wedding party of Bimal." Need I tell you any more why my mind was free from any doubts?

A silk merchant came to our house to take orders for my wedding dress. My mother called all my sisters-in-law to talk over things with, " We are old-fashioned folks, our tastes might not

suit young people." The young ladies gathered round the man in great enthusiasm. I too was hauled along by them to be a member of their committee. After a great deal of talking my eldest sister-in-law decided upon a deep crimson silk, covered all over with gold embroidery which flashed as streaks of lightning. It was especially to their liking, as it matched my name. I too liked the thing immensely, and, escaping to my room, sat down hugging the thought to my bosom that the grievance I had of appearing in an ordinary dress before a certain person was likely to be soon remedied.

On the day of the "maiden's feast" in our house a large number of presents arrived from the bridegroom's house. My sister-in-law, while praising their taste and liberality, remarked aside to me, "You are lucky, my dear, your husband's family does not seem to be any poorer than your father's family."

A large number of friends and relations soon arrived and I was scarcely left to myself even for a moment. Then,

too, I had to go about every day, as I was constantly being invited by others.

The day arrived at last. A woman never loses the memory of her wedding day however old she might be; neither have I.

From the morning I had been sitting on a seat of sandal wood, which was covered all over with leaves and flowers of *alpana*.* Of that numerous gathering, I alone was silent that day. Now and then one of my sisters-in-law or cousins would peep in, and go off smiling. Nearly all the relations we had in every part of the world had arrived, but fresh ones still poured in. At the sound of approaching footsteps I looked up and saw my mother entering accompanied by an old lady. Mother came near and said, "Vidyut, this is my aunt, bow down to her." I did as I was bid; the old lady blessed me fervently, then turning to my mother, asked her, "The bride is truly called Vidyut, my dear, but how is the bridegroom? I hope they will be

* Ceremonial drawings on auspicious occasions, on the floor, wooden seats, etc.

a well-matched pair?" I laughed in my heart. How should that old lady know how supremely handsome the bridegroom was?

My mother answered, "What does outward beauty matter, dear aunt? My son-in-law Prasanna is not much to look at, but I tell you my daughter is lucky to get such a husband."

Prasanna! And not much to look at! What is this? The daylight suddenly became pitch dark to my eyes and the furniture of the room began to swirl round and round. The old lady shrieked out in alarm. I suppose I must have looked rather strange. My mother threw her arms about me and said, "She has been fasting all the day, she is feeling weak, I think; come along with me, dear, and lie down, you need not sit here any longer." She went away after putting me to bed.

The joyous clamour around me sounded in my ears like the shrieks of the damned. I wished to cry out, but no tears came; instead something heavy as iron settled down upon my heart. It

was a drama worth seeing. The flash of lightning was seen, admired by all, but who knew where the thunder-bolt struck? Truly, a woman's heart is hard, otherwise how did I bear what I had to bear? A woman has at times to suffer in silence torments that would beat the records of hell.

It was already evening when a crowd of young girls burst into the room and pulled me up from the bed. The bride must begin her toilette now. They went on dressing and adorning me to their heart's content while I sat like a statue. After chattering and toiling for nearly two hours they finished their work. My eldest sister-in-law dragged me before a large mirror, and cried out, "Now have a good look, see whether you like your own appearance, never mind about another's likings."

I looked up at my own image, reflected in the mirror. Yes, I was fittingly adorned. I seemed to be wrapped about in flames, and flames too raged in my heart. My dress shone and sparkled as if steeped in liquid fire, my

wristlets and necklet of diamond shot sparks of fire. I wished that the fiery borders of my silken cloth would truly become a flame and wrap me in its fatal embrace. I moved away from before the mirror.

"Don't fall in love with your own image," mocked Kamalini. Fine indeed was my image! A great pang shot through my heart, as I remembered with what joyous hopes I had looked forward to this bridal toilette.

The bridegroom arrived. Women's rites, the reception of the bridegroom, all danced before my eyes like so many shadowy pictures. At the time of the "Auspicious Look," a large red silken cloth was thrown over our heads. All requested us to look at each other, and impelled by a sudden curiosity I looked up. A dark face was before me and eyes full of entreaty and love looked into mine. I dropped my eyes at once.

The marriage was over at last. We then took our seats in a large room, lighted up with great hanging lamps and chandeliers and crowded to the full with

girls and women. Their laughter and jokes knew no bounds. A flood of joyousness seemed to have swept over the assembly. The friends of the bridegroom were waiting outside and constantly sending to ask permission to come in and have a look at their friend's bride. At last they got the required permission. The ladies for the most part drew back with veiled faces behind the giant bedstead, and a few escaped out of the room and peeped through the windows. A large number of young men burst into the room with joyous shouts. They had their fill of jests and jokes, then began slowly to retire one by one, as the wedding supper was about to commence. When nearly all had departed someone suddenly pushed into the room and came and stood before us. I looked up. I felt as if I would drop down from my seat in a swoon and my hands and feet turned cold as ice. Somehow I recovered myself. My third brother came forward and addressing my husband said, "Prasanna, Manindra has come to see you." My husband looked

at the visitor with a smile of welcome. Manindra came nearer, and taking out of his pocket a parcel wrapped in flimsy blue paper, said, "Friend, I have brought a little present for your wife. I did not put it down with the other presents, as it would be quite lost in that magnificent array." Saying this he took off the wrapping, and taking out a chain of gold put it into my trembling hands. It was a garland of jasmines. Some cunning workman had copied nature very faithfully in gold. My husband answered back laughingly, but I did not hear what he said. I looked up once more. He too spoke his farewell in a long look, then disappeared in the rapidly thinning crowd. The traveller who had first stepped into my young life in the rosy blushing dawn now went out of it for ever in the red glare of festive lamps and through a noisy festal crowd.

The ladies again thronged into the room. Kamalini took the golden chain off my hands and put it round my neck, remarking, "It is certainly of Cuttack

workmanship. Our goldsmiths are not up to such work."

It was already midnight when we at last found ourselves alone. My husband tried to make me speak but in vain, and at last laid himself down to sleep. The hanging lamps went out one by one, flickering and spluttering. I sat still on my bed throughout that long night. Sleep refused to come to the aid of my tortured heart.

The next day I left the home of my childhood and stepped out with a stranger for a strange home. The most auspicious and joyous day in a woman's life ended for me in a flood of tears.

A warm welcome was waiting for me in the new home. But I seemed to have become an unfeeling automaton; I moved about as others made me move, and heard without answer the thousand remarks and questions which flew about me. The gladness and joy which I witnessed in others served only to petrify my heart more and more.

The bustle and noise subsided a little in the evening. Two or three girls

of the house then conducted me to my bedroom and kindly left me there to rest. As soon as they were out of the room I tore off my wedding finery and, putting out the single lamp which was burning in a corner, I flung myself down on the bare cold floor of the room.

How long I had been lying there I have no idea, but somebody's sudden entrance into my room made me sit up. It was a young girl of about eighteen, dressed in the white garb of a widow. Her face was beautiful, though she was dark in complexion. Her loose curly hair blew about her face, her eyes looked like veritable springs of sadness. It seemed as if this young maiden had just stepped out of the arms of the goddess of evening with her calm and sad beauty.

She bowed down to me and then sat down by me. She took my hand in hers and said, "I am one of your numerous nieces, my dear aunt. I am named Kalyani. You did not see me till now because I have lost the right to show my face at auspicious events. Your husband sent me to you thinking you

must be feeling lonely. But why are you sitting in the dark and on the floor? Please get up and sit on the bed."

The laughter and light all around had been only increasing the burning pain in my heart; the sad face of the girl somewhat comforted me. The tears now came; I wept and wept, and could not restrain myself at all.

Kalyani put her arms about me and began to comfort me. " Don't cry, dear," she said; " the pangs of separation from one's parents are keen indeed, but you will get accustomed to it. Women have to suffer far harder things. I too thought once that I shall not be able to rise up from the earth any more, but, see, I am going about now like everybody else." Then suddenly she stood up and cried, " But let such things go. We must not talk about them on this auspicious day. Let me arrange your room. Why have you put out the light?"

Kalyani lighted the lamp again and moved about the room, putting everything in its place. Suddenly she came

upon my wedding *sari,* thrown upon the floor. She picked it up and cried, " Why have you flung it here, dear? Well, I will put it up for you. The old women here say that one must not wear one's wedding dress twice. It is to be kept in a box, and when torn should be thrown into water."

She folded the thing carefully and then, pointing out a box of marble to me, said, " Do you see that box over there, by the side of the big iron safe? I put it there in the morning. It is my present to you. I have got nothing else. That one was given to me by my husband. Will you keep your wedding dress in it? It will then remain apart from your other things."

I assented. Kalyani put the dress there and went out. After a few minutes she re-entered with a few chains of camphor beads in her hand. These she arranged about the rich crimson silk. Suddenly I got up and, snatching that garland of jasmines from my neck, flung it into the box.

" Why do you put it there?" asked

Kalyani in astonishment. "It should go into the jewel box; you will have to take it out frequently."

"No," I said, "let it remain there; I will never take it out again. When I fling the wedding dress into water, this, too, shall accompany the dress."

Kalyani looked at me for a minute with her wonderful eyes, then said, "Very well, let it remain there."

III

"Rangadi!"

Young Vidyut, with her slender, graceful figure and wristlets and necklet of diamond, vanished into air. Oh dear, it was already dark, and the lamps have not yet been lighted. I have been dreaming with my eyes open. I have forgotten too about the children's supper. Ranu, too, has come back from her friend's house.

I got up from the floor and asked with a smile, "Now, darling, how many persons lost their senses over the entrancing beauty of Lakshmi?"

"There, now, Rangadi, you have

begun again. Who is to faint at my sight, pray? I don't think there is anyone idiotic enough for that. Now, take back your *sari;* I have folded it so carefully that not the faintest sign appears of its having been worn. Let us go and put it back in that box."

We went and stood before the box. "See here, Rangadi," cried Ranu, while putting back the sari, "the smell of camphor has nearly disappeared. It was but a little while ago that we opened the box. How fast it went! The camphor beads have gone long ago, the fragrance, too, now follows in their wake, but see, the box of marble is still the same."

"My darling," I answered, "fragrance stays with us only for a brief while, then it becomes one with the air. But the stone knows no change, it remains for ever."